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Desired qualities of public library leaders

Public library
leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to add to the limited extant literature on public library leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The study investigates the desired qualities and behaviours required for public library leaders by interviewing 30 senior librarians from Ireland, the UK and the east coast of the USA in order to develop an understanding of the perceptions of current leaders in the field of public librarianship. A review of the relevant literature was used to design an interview guide which was used to conduct structured in-depth face-to-face interviews.

Findings – The findings illustrate that there is no universal or common behaviour, even within national boundaries, for effective public library leadership. Two-thirds of the interviewees, however, prioritised attention to the implementation of vision – desired goals – as the most essential element of library leadership.

Practical implications – Demonstrates a lack of focus in the leadership problem in librarianship and the need for work to be devoted to the development of leaders. Shows that there is also an absence of success in planning.

Originality/value – The current study is the most in-depth study to date on this topic, drawing on face-to-face interviews with 30 public library leaders. Prior to his study, no in-depth face-to-face study on the topic of leadership in librarianship has been researched and published outside of North America. As this study was undertaken in three national jurisdictions – Ireland, the UK, and the USA – it is also the first interview-based transnational study on the topic.

Keywords Public libraries, Librarianship, Leadership, Ireland, United Kingdom, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within the limited body of literature on leadership in librarianship, many scholars and practitioners emphasise the centrality of leadership to librarianship. Knott (1997) suggests, the practice of librarianship is fundamentally a process of leadership. Kent (1996), a city librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library, contends that one of the requisites for public libraries to survive and prosper is solid and sound leadership. She believes that the “public library needs reasoned, outspoken, and well-articulated leadership if it is to flourish in a digital future”. Kent, however, believes that true leadership is difficult “in an institutional culture that abhors change, which is not an uncommon situation in many public libraries today” (Kent, 1996, p. 213).

Research by Lomer and Rogers (1983) on the administration of public libraries in England and Wales, shortly after Britain’s reorganisation of local government in the mid-1970s, included some tangential findings on library leaders and the centrality of their contribution to the success of public library services:



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Officers from outside the library and staff within the library agreed that the leadership of the chief librarian was the most important factor in the way the library operated and was developed. In practical terms, the chief librarian is always the most important influence on the way the library is run and it is his professional approach which has most effect on the service (Lomer and Rogers, 1983, pp. 125-127).

Crismond and Leisner (1988) suggested a list of "the top ten public library leaders" in America, based on a random survey among attendees at an American Library Association's midwinter meeting. Crismond and Leisner (1988) clarified that nobody qualified for that list merely because of excelling in just one aspect of leadership. They contended – from the initial random surveys and from subsequent telephone interviews with nine of those top ten leaders – that each leader "demonstrated a broad vision over time, combining commitment, determination, intelligence, and decision-making abilities to see that dreams come true" as well as courage and risk taking, openness to others, and political aptitude (Crismond and Leisner, 1988, p. 123).

Spitzberg (1986) observed that the meaning of leadership may depend on the kinds of institutions or services in which it is practised. Bryson (1999) contends that leadership effectiveness in information services, for example, can be measured by the extent to which the work units and the information service can achieve their objectives. She perceives that effective leadership skills are needed to reconcile the goals of management and of individuals with those of the information service and its parent organisation.

Leader qualities and behaviours

The taxonomy of leadership qualities and behaviours cannot be rigorous, as leadership is not a rigorous scientific phenomenon. The behaviours selected for this study aim to be cumulatively inclusive to represent the breadth and classification of desired library leadership qualities discussed in the literature – even if the taxonomies are of necessity somewhat arbitrary, reflecting the fluidity of describing overall individual human characteristics as well as those within the study of leadership behaviours. Dewey (1998) suggests that certain personal traits provide strength and depth to a librarian's professional qualities. Traits in this category mentioned by employers include creativity, sense of humour, energy, outgoing nature, self-motivation, evidence of initiative, and resourcefulness.

Many writers see leadership as an organic phenomenon and as an art (e.g. Heifetz and Linsky, 2002; Scholtes, 1998). Bleedorn (1988) saw leadership as an evolving concept. Gibb (1968) saw leadership as ever-changing and too diverse to be defined within scientific rigour. From these premises, it should be reasonably concluded that no list of behaviours could, therefore, achieve any rigorous or discrete categorisations.

Personal qualities are not fixed within individuals as they can change through influence, continued education, training, experience, as well as fluctuating within individuals, such as changing personal circumstances, or the impact of mentors and other colleagues. Bass (1999), for example, suggested that the same leader can sometimes be transformational and at other times transactional. Leadership is claimed by many to be a learnable phenomenon (e.g. Bass, 1999; Drucker, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Bennis and Nanus, 1985), allowing for fundamental change in personal qualities and characteristic behaviours. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) suggested that leaders deliberately alter their behaviour depending on their followers and

changing circumstances. Vroom and Yetton (1973) and Vroom and Jago (1988) suggested that leaders generally move between different styles of leadership depending on circumstances, implying that dominant leadership behaviours do not always take primacy in leadership situations. Overall, while the literature suggests desired qualities for leadership, the literature does not claim to be scientifically rigorous or to be free from subjective analysis. No behavioural categorisation is firmly grounded, in isolation, but is integrally linked to continually changing internal and external organisational situations. Nevertheless, as Northouse (1997) observed, in modern theories of leadership, a leader's behaviours are integral to his or her effective leadership, and many qualities/practices – such as people skills, integrity, determination, and intelligence – recur as focal points in the study of leadership. This paper presents the perceptions of thirty senior public library leaders in relation to the most desired behaviours or qualities needed for leading and developing their organisations.

Methodology

The key research question in this study focuses on senior-level public library leaders in Ireland, the UK, and the east coast of the USA. A total of 30 top-level public librarians were selected for inclusion in this study. None among the target selections refused to partake in the research. Initially, the idea of investigating the perceptions of all Irish city/county librarians was considered. In order to broaden the scope of the study, however, it was subsequently decided to include an investigation of library leaders outside Ireland. A decision was then taken to keep the same original total target number (30), but in a broader context, by choosing 50 per cent from outside Ireland, matching the revised target number of Irish county/city librarians to be interviewed. The rationale for choosing leaders in Ireland, the UK, and the USA was threefold:

- their institutions have a long-established and historical culture of providing public libraries funded by public money;
- they, along with their peer institutions in other countries, constitute an under-researched group; and
- because of their relative convenience of access for the authors.

The choice of the 15 Irish librarians was influenced by factors such as:

- their relatively high profile nationally, as reflected by their career experience, seniority, public networking profile, and organisational role;
- geographic convenience to research itineraries undertaken by the authors; and
- availability and co-operation of the library leaders.

A total 27 interviews were arranged using e-mail, the remaining three from initial face-to-face meetings. A criterion of qualifying as a research interviewee was that the librarian had to be the top leader, or at least the equivalent of a deputy leader, serving in a public library service. The 30 interviews were conducted in the countries where the participating library leaders worked. A total of 30 structured questions, based on a review of the relevant research literature, were asked of each of the thirty participating leaders. The 30 interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed to a word processor for subsequent analysis. For analysing the responses, a grounded theory approach to

categorising the data was used, wherein themes and patterns emerged (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). This method was chosen because it tends to be more co-ordinated and much less disjointed and requires researchers to stay close to the data, and any observations made have to be placed carefully in context. Nine broad thematic areas emerged from the findings. This paper focuses on one of these themes, i.e. desired behaviours or qualities of public library leaders.

Vision, the primary quality of a public library leader

Two-thirds of the participants suggested that vision was an essential quality of public library leaders. While "vision" was not specifically referred to in the research instrument of thirty questions, it was interesting that the majority of respondents prioritised vision as an essential quality of a public library leader. The following quotations from the librarians interviewed for this study typify these views:

A leader needs to set the overarching vision and values. Leadership is articulating vision (American librarian).

Other comments on vision included:

Having a vision and a commitment to public librarianship ideals are the primary qualities needed by public library leaders (British librarian).

Future planning for the library is about vision and aspiration – that means, putting more thought into leadership and management (British librarian).

What public library leaders need most of all is vision, tempered by realism of what might be achieved in today's local government context (British librarian).

The most essential qualities of a public library leader are: having a vision, having the ability to communicate that vision, and having commitment and drive to implement one's vision (British librarian).

A leader has to have a vision of where the service is going, or where it should be going (Irish librarian).

Our organisational culture should all the time be focused on service, therefore it is essential that the vision of the organisation's leadership must be founded on the same focus on service to the public (Irish librarian).

The primary requirement for any leader is vision. You have to have the big picture and the context of where you fit – because you can get too worried about buying books and overdue books or whatever, while the overall service might be failing (Irish librarian).

Overall, it was apparent from the interviews that the participants, as practising leaders, are very aware of the centrality of vision to their own strategic positions as leaders, both for guiding themselves as well as guiding the policies and practices of their respective library services. This reflects the centrality of vision in the general literature on leadership.

Other desired qualities of public library leaders

Goffee and Jones (2000) reported, despite numerous studies, that researchers have not found common personal attributes that are shared by the countless number of effective leaders, worldwide. When asked to name the most desired qualities of public library

leaders, the 30 respondents in this study prioritised a cumulative list of about 60 different attributes, such as: being strategic; politically skilled; having endurance; willing to take reasonable risks; being skilled in communication; direction-setting and staff-motivating. The views of the interviewees contradict the suggestions from Den Hartog *et al.* (1999) that leaders share some universal attributes. The following are illustrative of the varied views expressed by the interviewed leaders on the topic of desired library leadership behaviours:

For me, the most important aspect of leadership is the exercise of good judgement. Judgement is what we are after, and good judgement is an essential leadership attribute (American librarian).

A wide variety of attributes were suggested generally:

To be willing to take risks and to try new ventures are important for leadership (American librarian).

The chief librarian needs to have good verbal skills. They need to have an understanding of the environment in which they are working. They have to have good decision-making skills and to be decisive in implementing those decisions. Those are the top requirements (American librarian).

Being open to new ideas, being able to lead people in the direction that will be most helpful to a community; and gathering the legislation that is necessary to formulate the ideas to work within the community. We need to keep learning. All leaders need to learn and they need to pass on that learning (American librarian).

A combination of things: The most important thing that a leader should do is to be aware of what is happening, what the feedback on the ground is, and what is not happening. It is very important to have hands-on involvement, to mix with staff informally, and to have executives on a rota for sharing front-end duties (British librarian).

The same London-area librarian emphasised the need for leader librarians to network with library leaders from other authorities, especially nearby authorities, so that they can contribute and receive ideas for shared organisational benefits. He also suggested that regional library authorities should form groups to strengthen their collective bidding and funding power, their collective influence, and their co-operative projects. Others focused on broader issues:

A leadership course, attended by some of my colleagues, singled out energy as a key characteristic of a leader. It struck me as a very interesting perception. Energy is important because it enables a leader to keep a momentum going over a long period. Having a sense of strategy and how to implement strategy is also essential (British librarian).

The ability to get on with people, at all levels, would be one of the main qualities required by any library leader, and this includes relating well with the public, with library staff, and with management staff of the local authority. Good people skills include good communication skills, including listening well and being a good talker, are required. The leader has to have commitment, courage and must take risks. A leader certainly has to have openness to others. Library leaders need political skills because they rely on the support of politicians for resources. Political skills and political correctness are also needed to deal successfully with management and especially senior management. A leader must also reach out with trust, but trust is something that establishes itself over time, rather being a quality readily dispensed by any leader (Irish librarian).

Commitment to the public library ideal is probably the most important quality of a public library leader (Irish librarian).

The wide variety of qualities suggested by the 30 respondents portray professionals who have an overall positive outlook on the career of librarianship, a career viewed as far greater than just a means of employment, since the commitment to the public library ideal requires a wide variety of ideal attributes for any library leader. Commitment to adding value to society, to the service of communities, and to individuals is paralleled with the espousing of positive staff-leadership practices, including an emphasis on motivation and on positive personal values, such as integrity. The qualities portrayed in the above selected extracts from the 30 participants reflect themes in the literature on leadership behaviours. This variety illustrates how different leaders possess or espouse different combinations of personal or professional qualities. No two participants coincided with the same list of required behaviours.

Negative or toxic leadership attributes

Another area of concern for leadership is negative leadership or “toxic” leadership. The far-reaching, all-pervasive, and organisationally devastating impact of a defective leader was articulated in the interview data. The interviewed library leaders did share accounts of defective leadership behaviours in other chief librarians, both among their current peers and previous bosses at chief librarian level. The following quotation illustrates such cases:

I had head librarians whose management style I would not agree with. I recall behaviours that I would not want to do or to replicate. I worked in organisations where you would be transferred from one service point to another in a day, and out of it again the next day. I worked in organisations where the leader sat inside a locked office at all times, and would not talk to you unless you were a senior member of staff. I worked in organisations where the so-called leader sat in her ivory-tower office and never left it to talk to staff in branches. These memories never leave you and I would consider their managerial styles to be dictatorial, totally outdated, not treating people as adults not treating staff as being what they are or the best resource they have (Irish librarian).

Critical comments on negativity from leaders were articulated by other interviewees also:

An autocratic leader in a library service prevents the organisation from working effectively (British librarian).

Excessive exercising of power and control and not being willing to delegate are among the worst behaviours of a bad leader (Irish librarian).

This brief quotation pithily sums up the immeasurable negative consequences of toxic leadership:

A bad leader can ruin a generation of staff (Irish librarian).

This coincides with Ghoshal and Bartlett (1998), who contend that leaders have huge moral responsibilities over a generation of individuals and, therefore, make a major positive or negative difference to a society – a society of staff, customers, and related stakeholders. One interviewee in the current study stated that a handful of her current female peers are “disasters”. As no system is in place to easily dismiss a problem or

negative leader, very little can be done to stop the tenure of a seriously negative library leader. Such a system might appoint a chief librarian for a limited contractual period, requiring him or her to compete for reappointment after a specified number of years. This is a matter that might usefully be addressed by library parent bodies.

Carson *et al.* (1997) observed that a leader, rather than an employee, with a negative profile is much more damaging to an organisation as they have “the legitimate power of their offices to influence an organisation’s direction”, and they declare, “most people with sociopathic tendencies don’t typically wind up in prison – in fact, many wind up in the cushioned leather chairs of administrative offices” (Carson *et al.*, 1997, pp. 158-161). Carson *et al.* (1997) add that, “trying to change sociopathic library administrators is impossible – it can’t be done”, and colleagues who attempt to change them can “be setting themselves up to be scapegoated, victimised, abused” (Carson *et al.*, 1997, p. 162). In summary, all respondents in the current study accepted that poor leadership qualities do exist but they did not suggest how negative leadership might be addressed in library organisations where negative leadership prevails.

Implications for practice

A core finding in this study supports arguments in the literature suggesting a widespread dearth of leadership practice in public librarianship. One Irish and five British librarians articulated a view that: “many head librarians are not making that changeover from librarians to leaders”, “some library chiefs do not have the mental picture of themselves as real managers or leaders”, or “they are books people, sometimes they are authors, but they are not leaders”. Another respondent argued:

Leadership never featured highly in librarianship before.

Two participants suggested an apparent distinction between leadership and librarianship: “some librarians are very good professionals but are lousy leaders”, and “the assumption that a good library professional can be a good leader is not always true”. Overall, our findings reflect a widespread absence of an adequate focus on the issue of leadership in the library profession. It is clear, therefore, that time and attention needs to be devoted to developing new library leaders in order to allow librarians to make the leap from librarianship to leadership. Formal mentoring could usefully be introduced to overcome some of the above difficulties and should be especially useful for developing potential future leaders. All 30 interviewees reported that none of them had any formal mentoring at any stage of their careers. Because of the many benefits resulting from mentoring, as documented in the literature on mentoring should, therefore, be formally structured in public libraries.

Some of the British leaders complained that, because of increased burden of duties, the post of chief librarian is discouraging many potentially good leaders from seeking advancement to that role: “many people are too smart to want a leader’s job”, “people see the toll that pressure takes on their leader”, “my job has taken over my life, requires so much personal sacrifice, and it upsets work-life balance”. Similar comments included: “I have a good member of staff who says she is not interested in becoming a leader”, or “people in the next layer down see the challenges at this level and do not want to engage with those challenges”. These findings highlight a number of barriers contributing to a dearth of true leadership in public librarianship. Additionally, British librarians were particularly critical of the dilution of powers that chief librarians

previously used to have, because of the reorganisation of local government in the mid-1970s, which transferred many executive powers to more senior local authority officials. As well as having to answer to new hierarchical layers, British respondents also complained that they have to deal with much wider portfolios and new work responsibilities, such as arts, archives, museums, education, and in some cases, registries of births, marriages and deaths. If the role of the public library service is accepted as critical to the enhancement of individuals and communities, it implies that the leadership qualities of those charged with directing these institutions should also be of critical importance for delivering optimum vision and direction for optimum library service provision.

The reported absence of succession planning generally reflected a widespread absence of an adequate focus on developing desired leadership qualities in newer members of the profession. Indeed, prevailing policies tended to discourage talented staff from seeking career advancement in other library institutions. This practice ignored the ideal of developing overall leadership throughout the wider public library service. Another factor that did not contribute to a culture of developing new leaders was the widely held view that chief librarians do not see themselves as having a teaching role. The absence of formal mentoring also militated against more widespread leadership development in public libraries. A total of 90 per cent of respondents did, however, see themselves as role models, influencing or determining the behaviour of followers, arguing that followers tend to emulate senior grades, particularly the leader. The same percentage believe that they informally nurture leadership through facilitating the development of staff with leadership potential, such as, by exposing them to a wider range of responsibilities, by empowering them, or simply by "inspiring" them.

Conclusions

The interviewed leaders in this study articulated that leadership is an essential organisational quality but one without a formula, i.e. with "no absolutes". This mirrors Vasu *et al.*'s (1998) view that leadership is a multivariate phenomenon. The respondents saw no absolutes in library leadership. These findings concur with Scholtes (1998), who suggests:

There is no formula for leadership. Leadership consists of more than the approaches, capabilities, and attributes talked about in books.

To which he adds:

Leadership is an art, an inner journal, a network of relationships, a mastery of methods, and much, much more (Scholtes, 1998, p. 372).

The range of views on leadership qualities presented in the research findings for this study give a positive answer to the question posed by Taylor and Wilson (1996):

Is leadership an attribute, a style, a capacity for visionary thinking or some combination of all of these things? (Taylor and Wilson, 1996, p. 90).

The respondents shared the view that leadership is about influence, and typically described leadership as "bringing people with you" and they equated leadership (phenomenon) with motivation, just as they described the leader (agent) as a motivator.

They saw leaders as people with influence over other people. The interviewed librarians, thus, considered good leadership and leaders as catalysts of motivation. This reflects Fiedler (1971), Schein (1992), Kotter (1990), and Gardner (1986), each of whom emphasised the importance of motivation as a desired quality of leadership. The interviewees also asserted the importance of leadership for successful organisational outcomes. They saw leadership as “very important”, “more important than dollars”, “more important than facilities”, “more important than staff training”, and stressed that organisational success depends on leadership allied to “strategic and sustainable planning”. This underlining of the importance of leadership concurs with Bass (1990), who reported:

Countless surveys can be cited to support the contention that leaders make a difference in their subordinates' satisfaction and performance. Leaders also can make the difference in whether their organisations succeed or fail (Bass, 1990, p. 6).

Overall, the findings confirm Bass's summary:

Leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions (Bass, 1990, p. 8).

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