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Blueprint for a New Leader

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Blueprint for a New Leader

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Any good leader will spend the first six months in the position with a severe case of self-doubt: there is no way that you are capable of doing this job. Any accomplishments in the past must have been due to timing, happenstance or just dumb luck.

It's natural to feel incompetent in a new position, especially a leadership spot where others will be interpreting every gesture for hints about what the future might hold. Despite the box on the organization chart, you are starting at the very bottom in authority. People follow a new leader because it is required, not because they have any faith in you. This can be a tough adjustment for a new leader; you had plenty of authority in your old job, where you possessed considerable expertise and had developed excellent relationships.

Unfortunately, a new leader does not have the luxury of creating all these levels of trust and authority overnight. In most organizations, a leader cannot possibly be the expert at all things, and people need a little time to warm up to a new face.

For my first few months at my library, I jumped at every chance to check in books or work at the reference desk. I told myself that it was an opportunity to work alongside my new colleagues (which it was, and I loved working with them), but I eventually had to admit to myself that these tasks were the equivalent of a library security blanket. These were jobs that I had previously held and been successful at; what's more, that success could be measured, unlike the mysterious piles of paperwork waiting on my new desk. I was so eager to prove my work ethic, my willingness to pitch in, and my library credentials, that I was ignoring the very work for which I had been hired.

So where can a self-diagnosed incompetent find the professional equivalent of a Powdermilk Biscuit, those imaginary treats that "give shy persons the courage to go out and do what needs to be done?"

First, look yourself in the mirror and acknowledge that at least some of the nice things that people say about you are true. Reinforce and grow those skills by teaching them to others. Find ways to contribute your expertise to the professional discussion, such as offering an opinion on a listserv, serving on an OLA committee, or talking to people interested in librarianship as a career. Positive feedback in these small steps begets more confidence, which enables you to share even more, which raises your reputation, which in turn produces more opportunities to contribute.

Of course, that mirror is also going to remind you of everything that you don't know, too. List those items and seek out ways to improve your knowledge. Subscribe to business magazines; attend a League of Oregon Cities conference; read books (how cool that part of the answer is to *Read Books!*)

Most of all, seek out individuals outside of your organization to be your colleagues. It can be lonely to be a leader. There are many confidential decisions and pieces of private information that you must carry alone for long periods of time. Finding people outside your immediate work group can alleviate some of that isolation. These external colleagues don't need to know every gossipy detail of your work life; quite the opposite. These are the folks who help you see the bigger picture and put your work and library in perspective.



Make sure that some of these connections come from the world beyond libraries. Budget concerns, personnel issues, and bureaucratic frustrations are not unique to libraries, and it can be helpful to share those experiences with someone outside your normal circle.

In my case, a long-established book club keeps me energized and informed. One of my former MPA professors recruited former students to read non-fiction, often biographies, and discuss the leadership lessons within those books. The biggest benefit, however, is often the first hour, when we commiserate about our jobs in public agencies. My book club colleagues serve as my release valve and my reality check.

Once you start sharing experiences with professionals from other libraries and other fields, you'll realize that your self-diagnosed incompetence is misplaced: you've got this library leadership thing handled. And once you've got everything figured out, it's probably time to look into the mirror again and start planning your next career move, something that will make you feel the terror of incompetence all over again! 🌿

A very quick survey on Publib provided these suggestions for keeping perspective:

What we do outside of the library

- Join service clubs
- Volunteer for community organizations
- Have coffee with retired library directors
- Seek out directors from other non-profits
- Patronize local businesses and get to know the owners
- Attend Chamber of Commerce social events
- Participate in listservs
- Seek continuing education and leadership programs

What we read

Periodicals (paper or online)

- Fast Company
<http://www.fastcompany.com/>
- GOOD Magazine
<http://www.good.is/>
- Wired
<http://www.wired.com/>
- Governing
<http://www.governing.com/>
- Harvard Business Review
<http://hbr.org/magazine>

Tracking Tools

- Paper.li
<http://paper.li/>
- Google Alerts
<http://www.google.com/alerts>
- Tweetbeeps
<http://tweetbeep.com/>

