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Changing Leaders and Changing Leadership

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T he phrase "changing leadership" brings two meanings to mind. For one, it can mean a change from one leader to another. As a newish academic library director, I certainly identify with that context, having experienced the excitement and adventure that changing leadership represents. I also recognize that changing leadership can be fraught with challenges and obstacles.

Before my appointment as University Librarian, I served as the interim UL. Another interim leader told me, "Your job as interim will be tougher because people liked and admired your predecessor." My friend was right. Regime change always seems easier if the previous regime was somehow faulty. However, a new library director needs to be aware: as a new leader, you embody change, and change, even when it is positive, can engender anxiety.

I am familiar with an institution that brought a new leader on board after years of enduring a harsh administration that didn't treat employees respectfully and wasn't particularly forward thinking. The organization seemed primed for change, but eventually the new leader met with failure. I suspect that the individual never recognized that repeated attempts to bring about change required kid gloves rather than boxing gloves. One outcome was to occasionally hear staff wishing that the former harsh administration would return. It's like the organization had become subject to a phenomenon akin to Stockholm syndrome but on an institution-wide basis.

A new director needs to establish herself as the new leader, articulating her ideas, motivations, strategies, decision-making processes and, most importantly vision. But this can be a delicate balancing act that has to take into account the impact of change and also has to understand the foundation upon which to build success as a leader.

In the context of changing leaders, I would counsel new leaders to remember that too much focus on the internal operations and relationships can be detrimental to the equally, if not more, important focus on the external. Even as library directors or library leaders, we are part of some administrative food chain. We must do the work to communicate our value and vision up and down that chain and make the necessary external connections that can benefit our libraries.

The other thought that "changing leadership" brings to mind involves changing or altering leadership itself. "Changing leadership" can signify transforming or altering the functions or processes of leading. Haven't we all dreamed of how we would lead, manage, or administer differently if we were in charge of libraries? My motivation for leading differently is born out of my intellectual and professional involvement, and interest in social change, leadership, and management theory. It's influenced by my passion for academic and intellectual freedom and by my readings in feminism, queer literature, and other issues of equity and diversity.

I think it is possible to approach leadership (and management) without relying on the centuries-long approach that established hierarchies and emphasized authority. I think it is necessary. Respondents in a survey by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) noted the need for future leaders to place greater emphasis on "building relationships, collaboration, and change management" (Martin, 13). It is crucial to understand that the "library scene" involves a great big world; a leader can no longer rely on knowing everything there is to know even about librarianship.

A leader does have to do the work to stay on top of issues, but a leader also has to be open to ideas from all levels and even seek those ideas. CCL's report also described an emerging trend in leadership whereby leaders are asked to focus "more energy on creating an environment where others can help them succeed" (Martin, 3).

Being a new leader affords the opportunity to bring about change because the leader literally changes from one person to another. But a new leader also brings her own vision and direction into play that is informed by her personal and professional sense of values, relationships, excellence, and motivations, and rewards. Changing leadership also challenges a new leader to change herself. It will be uncomfortable as you are called out of your comfort zones. So expect growth, but acknowledge that growth is often a forceful activity. Just consider the oak seedling that splits rock. Acknowledge also that growth for a new leader can ultimately be fruitful.

Sources Consulted

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