

Helene Gold

Lessons from the flames

Leadership and resilience

Late in 2022, I submitted an essay to *C&RL News* on how my leadership skills and abilities have evolved since the publication of my 2016 article “At least you didn’t burn the place down: Leadership isn’t for everyone.”¹ I explained how personal growth combined with the confluence of timing and institutional support provided me with a unique leadership opportunity to serve as the library’s interim co-dean and then as the library’s association dean of academic engagement at New College of Florida, a public liberal art honors college. Since its submission, my now-former employer has been thrown into chaos as the result of a hostile political takeover. The college president and other administrators have been fired (including yours truly), five faculty members were denied tenure by the newly appointed board of trustees aligned with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, strategic decisions continue to be hashed out behind closed doors, and the college has been thrust into the national media spotlight. Needless to say, it’s been an exhausting and heartbreaking experience. It was clear that I needed to write a new response to my 2016 article that addressed my growth and professional development over the past seven years but also one that included how I navigated this crisis from a leadership position.

In my original submission, I addressed my 2016 article directly, explaining that my previous leadership stint wasn’t much of a leadership experience at all due to an ineffective organizational structure that provided me with the title of department chair but without supervisory responsibility. I was stuck in a vague middle ground between manager and librarian, working 60-hour weeks to fulfill my duties as chair while my librarian workload increased as I sought and achieved “continuing contract” status. When I stepped down as chair, my director and I agreed that the position needed to be eliminated altogether but it felt like a professional and personal failure.

I went on to explain that I began working in the library at New College of Florida in 2018 as the information literacy librarian and ending in May 2023 as the associate dean. I was delighted to discover that leadership was right for me after all, benefitting from being in the right place, at the right time, with the right support. The former provost embraced a shared interim leadership model for our library after the dean moved on in 2021 and for over a year, I shared the interim dean role with a librarian colleague who ultimately was named library dean and I was named associate dean. Six months later, without warning or notice, the chief human resources officer and new interim provost informed me that my employment was terminated due to “reorganization.” After four and a half years of dedication and strong performance evaluations, I was handed a severance packet, and told to pack up

my office and leave the building that day. Since I relinquished my faculty status and union membership when I accepted the promotion to associate dean and was working in an “at-will employment” state, I had no recourse. My firing occurred three weeks before the end of the spring semester, a move that seemed intended to cause maximum disruption and add to the already existing campus destabilization. But I did not go quietly. A close faculty colleague and I immediately crafted a press release criticizing the administration and I’ve since given many local and national interviews, applied and interviewed for positions outside of Florida, and have once again asked myself how this experience has shaped me as a leader, mentor, and librarian.

My response to the rapidly shifting situation during my last few months of employment remained consistent as I provided as much clear, factual information as possible to library employees and provided support and encouragement to those seeking alternative employment. My approach was aligned with the dean of the library for the first couple of months, but in the weeks leading up to my firing, a shift occurred. I was no longer in the flow of regular communication, staff told me that they were all being encouraged to remain employed by the college, and overall I was out of the loop. Clearly, something changed but why, how, and when remained a mystery. That mystery was resolved with my sudden termination.

In writing this more than two months following my departure (and in a much more contemplative mood), I feel more confident and secure in my leadership values, including when and how to take a stand against injustice, when and how to communicate to library employees, and how to build a culture of trust that strengthens departmental effectiveness and values employee’s work and expertise. As librarians and library leaders, we are in a unique and frontline position to take stands against censorship, reduction of library funding and support, eroding patron access to services and resources, and undue political interference. But it is risky to take a stand against our supervisors and college administration since strained relationships can result in personal and program backlash, including hostile/diminished communication, bullying, and retribution. We must carefully weigh the need to protect and support our libraries and our employees while protecting our own professional and employment security. There are times we must take a stand but often we cannot. In these times, our leadership skills are truly tested.

Throughout my 25-year career in academic libraries, I have experienced very strong and very poor leadership and have learned lessons from both. Building trust and fostering a culture of respect is paramount and nothing builds trust and earns respect more than engaging in clear, consistent communication around processes, expectations, changes, and strategic planning. In the absence of communication, we fill in the gaps with speculation and gossip, inferring whatever we can from what little we can glean. This can create a demoralizing and discouraging workplace, resulting in high staff turnover, siloing of departments, diminished productivity, and overall creates a harmful, unsafe, and needlessly exhausting environment. Healthy leaders provide opportunities for feedback on how they can improve, how they can create a more equitable and supportive workplace, and how that feedback will translate into tangible change.

My key advice to librarians considering taking on leadership roles is to identify what brings you the most satisfaction from your work. Which challenges do you welcome and which do you hesitate to accept? Identify your strengths and areas for growth. Do you excel at building relationships across campus, managing e-resources, writing grants, developing curriculum?

Are there opportunities for you to take on projects that require leadership? Do you have role models who demonstrate healthy leadership and encourage your growth and development? Are you excited to support larger initiatives, engage in difficult conversations, and develop a vision for library growth and change in uncertain times? If you have support and mentorship and the desire to learn and grow (grounded in compassion and introspection), then I encourage you to take on leadership opportunities. We need you now more than ever! ♪

Note

1. Helene Gold, “At Least You Didn’t Burn the Place Down: Leadership Isn’t for Everyone,” *C&RL News* 77, no. 10 (November 2016): 502–3, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.77.10.9571>.