The importance of learning in a shared leadership model

by Brinley Franklin

Once a college or research library makes a commitment to adapt a shared leadership model, leadership roles at all levels of the organization begin to change.

As Peter Senge writes in *The Fifth Discipline*: "The new view of leadership in learning organizations centers on subtler and more important tasks. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning."1

Shared leadership models typically demonstrate at least three characteristics: empowerment, accountability, and a decision-making partnership. There are compelling reasons for today’s libraries and research organizations to adapt this leadership model.

Empowering others

Generally speaking, today’s college and research library staff are highly educated, self-motivated, and possess specialized skills. These are all characteristics that support a shared leadership model. The complex world of library and information services requires real-time decisions and answers in an increasingly electronic and information-driven academic and research environment.

Traditional managers cannot be everywhere in time to make the required important decisions, nor do they often understand the technical work currently being performed by subject specialists or information technology professionals.

More specifically, empowering individuals or teams who perform work allows library and research staff closest to the task to independently improve work processes and make decisions. This can achieve both economic savings and service improvements. Accountability ensures that empowered staff use resources at their discretion wisely and learn from their decisions. A decision-making partnership gives library staff more ownership in the critical decisions being made and allows appropriate decisions to be made at all levels of the organization.

There are, however, many things to be learned in a shared leadership model. The various types of decision-making, such as directive, consultative, majority, consensus, and unanimity, need to be learned or relearned. As leadership roles are distributed throughout the organization, traditional leaders and their staff need to learn about group process and facilitation skills, role-playing, and leadership styles, including coaching and mentoring. Communication skills and interpersonal skills become increasingly important and may also need to be nurtured or improved.

While many library and research staff members are expert in their subject or technical areas, they also need to develop social skills to successfully promote and deliver

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quality services. We all need to recognize and reinforce through our actions that every staff member has certain leadership qualities that will be needed by our organizations at some time, and we need to respect and appreciate diversity in all its forms.

Learning to work more productively and improve services while sharing leadership roles and making group decisions with colleagues leads us to appreciate that various personality traits are necessary for a shared leadership model to be successful. David Barry identifies these behaviors as: envisioning, organizing, spanning (to outside groups and individuals), and social.2

Learn about users’ needs
Library and research staff also have much to learn about our users and their needs. In the traditional hierarchical leadership model, managers often made the major collection and service decisions. In this era of knowledge management, and in a shared leadership model, library and research staff are ideally positioned to directly offer the knowledge resources, social capital, and information infrastructure we have available to our users, but we need to learn to personalize those services and tailor them to our users’ needs.

In short, in a shared leadership model, there is much to learn. Traditional leaders are learning facilitation, coaching, and mentoring skills. Staff are learning social, interpersonal, and group process skills. We are all learning more about our users to better serve them.

As Peter Senge so aptly states: “Systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning—these might just as well be called the leadership disciplines as the learning disciplines. Those who excel in these areas will be the natural leaders of learning organizations... Or, to put it another way, who are the natural leaders of learning organizations? They are the learners.”3

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