Learning to Lead: experiences of a leadership development programme

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Abstract

Introduction: Leadership is an important facet of library and information roles and is a key aspect of career development and progression within the profession. Throughout the leadership literature, the profile of competencies and skills that are attributed to an effective library leader is diverse. Therefore, how does one identify what skills are required, and what training methods are best to achieve those skills? Leadership training opportunities specific to the library and information sector are limited. Therefore librarians often find themselves looking beyond the profession to meet their leadership development needs.

Objectives: To identify the leadership competencies and skills that are most critical for librarians to develop, and how these training needs can be met.

Methods: The presentation will be based on a recent literature review of the leadership literature in library and information science, conducted by the presenter, and the presenter's experiences on a recent generic leadership development programme delivered by The University of Sheffield.

Results: The literature is diverse in its definition of the profile of skills and competencies that contribute to effective leadership. Therefore, flexibility may be the key for library leaders, particularly within the fast-evolving nature of the profession, which requires continual innovation and change. Formal courses and training programmes range from in-house training at an organisational level, collaborations across organisations, and professional associations offering leadership training programmes, within and external to the library and information field. Beyond formal training, the literature identifies activities such as mentoring, observation, peer-support and networking as useful leadership learning opportunities.

Discussion: The leadership programme studied by the presenter comprised of three face-to-face learning modules, a series of action learning groups, and a leadership exchange. In addition, delegates identified a challenge they faced in relation to leadership and worked on strategies to resolve this as part of the course. The presentation will explore the benefits of studying beyond the library and information profession and networking with potential leaders in other disciplines. Any limitations to this approach will also be explored, compared with leadership programmes specifically designed and developed for library and information professionals.

Conclusions: Based on the current literature and examples from the presenter's own practice, the presentation will conclude with tips on what works, to assist individuals in planning their own leadership development. Time and resources to attend face-to-face training opportunities can be limited, so this will include low-cost, self-directed, and online opportunities.

Key words: Leadership; Education, Continuing; Learning; Information Science; Libraries; Review Literature as Topic.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that leadership is an important facet of library and information roles, particularly for career development and progression. Leadership is often listed as a competency in professional skills audits. For example, the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (PKSB) (1) includes a section on "Leadership and Advocacy". In 2015, Lawton and Burns (2) conducted a review of competencies required for health librarians and found that leadership was one of ten areas that were common to at least three professional association educational policies. In March 2016, Library Journal named leadership as one of the top skills required by tomorrow's librarians (3). However, there is little consensus in the literature about the skills and attributes that are required to be an effective leader. Research published by the author and colleague in 2012 (4), found that health library and information managers typically underestimate their leadership skills. Therefore it can be difficult for library and information professionals to assess their training and development needs and to identify opportunities to develop as a leader.

So, leadership in the library and information profession is a complex issue, leading to a number of questions. What skills are required? How can we effectively assess our skills? What training and development opportunities are available? There are also a number of barriers to access training, including limited time and financial resources, particularly to attend face-to-face learning opportunities. Training opportunities specific to the library and information sector can be limited, so we may need to consider looking beyond the library profession to meet our leadership development needs.

Objectives

The presentation explores the leadership competencies and skills that are most critical for librarians to develop, and how these training needs can be met, including profession-specific programmes, generic leadership courses, and low-cost, self-directed training opportunities.

Methods

A literature review on leadership in the library and information profession was conducted by the author and a colleague in 2014 (5). This review has been updated in May 2016, to identify new publications since the original literature review. The author has recently completed an organisation-wide leadership development programme at The University of Sheffield (The Sheffield Leader), and will draw on experiences of the benefits and any challenges to studying beyond the library and information profession.

The Sheffield Leader is a leadership development programme at The University of Sheffield (TUOS). There are four levels, with guidance for individuals to select the appropriate level. Nominations to attend the programme are via line managers. The author studied level two, which comprised three face-to-face modules over a period of four months. The cohort was made up of 17 members of staff from across TUOS. Two action learning sets were conducted, where delegates identified a challenge they faced in relation to leadership and worked on strategies to resolve this. Each delegate presented their progress with this issue at the end of the course. Line managers attended part of the closing event, for a one-to-one discussion on future planning and support. Leadership exchanges with other members of the cohort were encouraged.

Results
The original literature review conducted in 2014 (5), found diversity in the profile of skills and competencies that contribute to effective leadership. This remains to be true. In a Library Issues briefing, it is noted that *'Leadership is something often spoken of as if everyone has the same definition, but like most things that are actually complex, it has been conceptualized in a variety of ways such as skills, traits, or knowledge'* (6). Leadership is difficult to express generically, as different skills, traits, and knowledge are required at different times. An effective leader utilises a combination of leadership styles as the situation demands (7). Indeed, this flexibility may be the key for library leaders, particularly within the fast-evolving nature of the profession, which requires continual innovation and change. As we seek to demonstrate value and impact, particularly in making a case for the funding of information resources (including library personnel), we are justified in exploring beyond the profession. As library leaders, our sphere of influence must extend beyond our library walls. Therefore studying with peers, particularly within our home organisations, is beneficial. The ability to foster collaborative relationships in order to promote the goals and objectives of the library is noted as a leadership role (8).

Formal courses and training programmes in leadership development range from in-house training at an organisational level, collaborations across organisations, and professional associations offering leadership training programmes, within and external to the library and information field. With a variety of options available, how does one go about selecting the "right" course? Typically, there is a level of pragmatism to this, including what is currently available and the amount of time and funding you have access to. You may be focusing on filling particular gaps in your career development, which can have an influence on the type of leadership training you seek. You may need to make a "business case" to gain permission, time and/or funding to attend, so you need to consider carefully what your best chance of success with this is.

The author studied a leadership development course at organisation level, therefore mostly draws on the experience of this. However, several connections to library and information peers and colleagues studying at professional association level were made, to enable some comparisons to be drawn. The key is to make the best of the opportunity you have available to you: *"After all, each leadership development program is very good in some way. It is not so important which one you select. It is important that you use the one you select."* (9)

Discussion
A brief comparison of the Sheffield Leader programme with a profession-specific programme (in this case CILIP Leadership) reveals very little difference in the main subjects studied (see Table 1). It is important to note that the CILIP Leadership programme is longer, and it includes online activities between the face-to-face workshops, which are not presented here. Some subjects are similar and overlap in content – for example "Leading Others" had elements of leadership communication. Other similarities include the size of the cohort.

Table 1: Comparison of workshop topics

	Sheffield Leader	CILIP Leadership
Introduction to Leadership	✓	✓
Leadership Theories		✓
Leadership Styles	✓	
Strategic Planning	✓	✓
Change Management	✓	✓
Governance		✓
Leadership & Communication		✓
Leading Others	✓	
Advocacy		✓
Self-Awareness, Influence & Impact	✓	

The main differences are in the cohort. The author was studying with leaders with varied roles and from varied disciplines, employed by the same organisation. In a profession-specific programme, one studies with leaders in similar roles in the same discipline, usually employed by different organisations. In terms of course activities, CILIP Leadership delegates work on group project contributing to the wider profession. In the Sheffield Leader programme, delegates identify an individual "project" (the leadership challenge) directly related to their current role.

The main benefits to studying at an organisation level were that the programme was closely aligned to the aims and objectives of the University and covered what was expected from a leader at TUOS, allowing direct applicability to one's role. The programme was delivered by two facilitators, one internal and one external, which gave a balanced view and learning from a wide experience of leadership. Prior to the course, mapping one's role to a Sheffield Leader level was particularly useful in terms of self-assessment and meant that the cohort was made up of direct leadership peers. Undertaking an individually selected project that was directly related to working practice, ensured learning on the course was used in the day-to-day role, an important facet of professional development.

The main limitations compared with the CILIP Leadership programme, was the absence of prescribed activity between the face-to-face sessions. There wasn't a mandatory online element for the cohort, such as the CILIP virtual learning environment (VLE), but there is a virtual online community of Sheffield Leaders which participants can make use of if they wish. This meant there was less time commitment involved, but it was sometimes difficult to keep engagement with the programme and cohort once we were all "back in the office". Beyond the face-to-face sessions, learning was very much self-directed, it took discipline to do any further reading, arrange exchanges and network with the cohort. In addition, any mapping to the University staff review and development process was at an individual level, with no formal guidance. The CILIP Leadership programme maps to the PKSB and delegates produce a personal development plan linked to this. This is a very useful exercise and something individuals studying more generic programmes could apply.

In reflecting on the experience of the leadership programme, the author was immediately drawn to networking with delegates from the common disciplines of library and information science and health research. However, beyond these initial connections, the perspectives of unrelated disciplines were useful and it was refreshing to gain alternative approaches to library and information issues. The "learning from others" aspect of the programme, sharing leadership experiences with peers, group problem-solving, and networking with colleagues across the University, was invaluable. The programme encouraged reflection, both individually and as a group, which was another useful facet of the course. Having protected time away from day jobs allowed the cohort to make full use of this, including 360° feedback, which is noted as a useful tool for assessing current leadership skills (4).

Conclusion

When planning leadership development, the key things to investigate are what opportunities are currently available and how to make the most of these. A particularly useful tool is to assess your current "sphere of influence". Are there "gaps" that would be useful to fill in terms of your leadership role? Decide who it would be most useful for you to make connections with at this time, and select a programme that will assist with this. Your sphere of influence may change at different points in your leadership career, according to your objectives at that time.

If currently, formal training is not feasible, consider low-cost opportunities. Could you arrange a leadership exchange with a peer? Exchanges can range from one-off face-to-face meetings, or more regular, virtual exchanges. Could you start a leadership book group? Not as difficult as it sounds, as you only need a minimum of two people to discuss. Alternatively, there are existing virtual book groups you could join, including the Library Leadership Reading Group on Twitter (10). A particularly useful tool, requiring minimum organisation and effort, is to learn from example. Look at leaders in your organisation and previously in your career. Reflect on their effectiveness, and note the good and the bad. You can also use this technique on leaders from fiction and history, notice their successes and failures, and see if you can identify their leadership styles.

Assess your level of leadership in your current role. Think about areas where you lead. This does not have to be as a designated manager of people or projects, you may be leading on a specific piece of work or a sub-group of colleagues. You may also be an opinion leader. Is there something specific that you are an expert on in your organisation, or in the wider profession, that people often seek your advice on? This may also be in a virtual sense, social media has enabled a whole wealth of opinion leaders throughout the profession.

Leadership development is a very individual thing, and may change at any point in time. Focus on what would be most useful now, and ensure that you make use of the development opportunities you take (whether formal or informal, profession-specific, or more general), beyond the training course, discussion, or reading. Reflection is key in order to enable you to put your leadership skills into working practice.

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