FUTURE LEADERS: WHAT DO THEY THINK?

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ABSTRACT

Objectives were to establish the context of leadership in UK public and academic libraries; to assess the views, perceptions and attitudes of recently qualified librarians to leadership skills; and to assess the implications for future library leadership. Interviews with key informants within the library profession took place to establish the leadership context. An online questionnaire investigating opinions on a range of leadership skills was administered to recent library graduates from Loughborough University, UK; 37 responses were received representing a response rate of 22.84%. The perceptions and views of current library leaders and recently qualified library professionals on leadership skills both coincide and differ in key areas. For example, senior leaders believe there are future leaders in the workforce but recent graduates are not confident in their own leadership abilities. One area of agreement is the centrality of communication skills. This study has highlighted the importance of leadership skills for librarians and the nature of these skills. It also has surfaced again the question of whether leadership skills are personality traits or whether they can be taught.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a small scale research project designed to explore the leadership potential of recent master’s graduates entering the field of library and information services in the UK. The research focused on opinions about the nature and level of leadership skills and awareness in two distinct groups:

- Current senior leaders of academic and public libraries
• Former students in the MA/MSc in Information and Library Management (ILM) programme in the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University, UK, who are at an early stage of their careers.

Research indicates that the need for leadership is more critical than ever as the senior management generation is reaching retirement. A shortage of leadership talent has been identified, both generally and within the library and information services (LIS) workforce. Library leadership programmes exist but there is little research investigating the leadership potential and attitudes of either LIS students or those just commencing library work.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Leadership skills have generated much discussion, debate and analysis. For example, Boyatzis developed a cluster of leadership skills needed by leaders at all organisational levels. Included in the skills needed by top level leaders were visioning; inspiring; entrepreneurship; conceptualisation; logical thought; oral presentation. In a more recent attempt to list leadership skills, the ability to be emotionally compelling and to create resonance with others were identified as key. Included in these were self-awareness, active listening, compassion and empathy, and integrity.

Various commentators have also looked to establish leadership skills needed in the library sector. One study in the UK public library sector identified vision, authority, political skill, ability to make connections and to carry staff forward as important. A broader approach was taken in proposing that all leadership skills revolved around influencing people in order to achieve objectives. The leader has to sell the vision, motivate people, gain co-operation and develop partnerships. Another author has bundled leadership skills together under empowerment as the umbrella term. A librarian from the special library sector in the United States has proposed that core leadership skills are communication, modelling behaviours, developing others, recognizing the value of others, taking responsibility, and creating results.

Leadership skills have also been established by various different library stakeholders. A recent survey identified leadership skills from the perspective of senior library managers from UK and Australian universities. The skills were grouped under contextual awareness, interpersonal, management, mental skills, and technical skills. Another study gathered the perspectives of Generation X librarians (born between 1965 and 1979) on leadership skills. The majority of the skills they rated highly were centred on communication and interpersonal attributes. Some limited work has been completed with library students on their views on leadership skills. In 1979 a questionnaire about leadership styles and skills was given to library students; effective consultation skills were found to be the most
important. In a further study, over a 6 year period, library students were asked to identify skills and qualities of good leaders. Awareness, initiative, foresight and interest in the workforce were identified.

Another lively debate takes place around whether leadership skills can be taught. Some observers are convinced that effective leaders result from both inherent traits and carefully developed skills. A library commentator provides a contrary perspective, arguing that leadership skills are gained not through training, but through experience and the problems leaders overcome. The purpose of our small scale study was to gain a deeper understanding of leadership skills in the library sector.

**Methodology**

Two stages were used to gather qualitative opinion and quantitative data. Firstly, telephone interviews were conducted with eight key professionals within the LIS profession to gain insight and an overview from a qualitative viewpoint of leadership issues. They were selected by the authors because of their national profiles and informed views on the issue of leadership. The group comprised four public library and four academic library leaders in the UK. Their views informed the second stage of the research. To enable candid and unconstrained comments to be made, they were assured their responses would be recorded anonymously.

Secondly, we sought to obtain the views of a range of relatively new LIS professionals by asking for their impression of the need for various types of leadership skills and qualities. The list of leadership skills identified by Walton, Burke and Oldroyd was used as basis for a five point Likert-scale questionnaire with 34 questions followed by four open-ended qualitative questions to enable the respondents to reflect on their responses (see appendix). The questionnaire was delivered online to alumni who graduated between 2001 and 2007 from the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University. Details of the questionnaire were sent to 162 alumni by e-mail or post, with a resulting response of 37 (22.84%). This was regarded as an acceptable response rate, but insufficient to conduct a statistical comparison by year of graduation. The respondents were a subset of all alumni, being those that had chosen to register with the Alumni association as available for contact. It may be inferred that this sub-set might be those more ready to engage with professional matters and therefore presumably have an interest in leadership. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Tables 1 to 5 below; for brevity, only the percentage choosing the categories “very great extent” or “great extent” is presented in ranked order.
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Despite the wide concern noted in the literature about the quality of library leadership, some of the library leaders interviewed were not worried about the future leadership of the profession. Two of the university librarians interviewed suggested that many of the necessary skills were acquired through experience and that leaders would emerge in time while one of the public librarians felt that the work on leadership led by Museums, Libraries and Archives Council had demonstrated that there was quite strong leadership within the profession. One respondent thought that there might be a crisis in library leadership in five to ten years time, however, and three of the four public librarians agreed, focusing particularly on the inability of existing leaders and middle managers likely to move into leadership positions to think strategically and influence and engage with local authority agendas. Interviewees often made the point that a lot of staff lacked the ambition, drive and confidence to be leaders. A public librarian said:

I look at the librarians that I’ve got and they’re very happy to be librarians. They perhaps want to be a senior librarian or a team leader but they really don’t have the ambition to go higher up in the organisation and, of those, only a tiny minority want to go beyond libraries.

She also suggested that staff with ambition could take advantage of this and seize the opportunities available. Looking further ahead, many of the library leaders interviewed had more confidence in new and recent recruits to the profession. One public librarian described himself as “quite cheerful” about the calibre of recent recruits and a university library leader was “optimistic” about the future, indicating that there were several staff in his service with the necessary skills, personality and flair to be great future leaders. Another public librarian contradicted the point made above about staff lacking confidence, stating that she had no concerns about new recruits to the profession because “what I see is a lot more confidence in themselves which I think is a key part of leadership”.

Analysis of the comments from those who responded to the qualitative questions at the end of the graduate survey questionnaire, however, would appear to support the view of the majority of the library leaders that librarians lack confidence in their leadership ability. Graduate respondents were generally quite modest about their leadership skills. When asked to comment on the extent to which they had the leadership skills listed in the questionnaire, words such as “moderate,” “reasonable,” “slight,” “some” and “average” were common. One graduate suggested that s/he had “variable confidence,” something that we suggest characterised the survey respondents generally. One respondent, though, was quite upbeat about his/her own skills but disparaging about those of colleagues:
I’m a far more experienced manager than most I have encountered in the public library sector – it is the worst led and most badly managed profession imaginable. The more mediocre you are the better it is for you: bean-counter heaven.

These comments appear to contradict those made by many of the library leaders interviewed who stressed that the LIS sector needed people with flair, imagination and self-assurance.

Perhaps the majority of graduates were being realistic, rather than self-effacing, about their leadership skills. Some had clearly given this issue some thought and had analysed where they felt they were deficient. One respondent felt that, although professionally competent, s/he lacked the “strategic thinking/visionary/inspirational aspects” which s/he considered essential for leadership. Another stated that s/he only “reluctantly” challenged ideas when “absolutely necessary or invited to do so because of my innate dislike of conflict,” suggesting that this “increasingly appears as a serious character flaw in a potential leader.” Evidence from Tables 1 and 2 suggests that the majority of graduates did not believe that these skills were as essential as some of the others listed. Only 60% of graduates responded that they thought “blue sky thinking” was of very great or great importance, for example. Similarly, the attitude of the graduates towards risk-taking was interesting. While one of the public library leaders interviewed commented that risk taking and an entrepreneurial attitude were becoming more important in the public library sector, Table 2 shows that just 46% of survey respondents felt that library leaders needed this to a very great or great extent. One graduate, while recognising that leaders have to be willing to trial new products if the service and the profession are to move forward, said “such risks can be dangerous in institutions where financial constraints are tight if the capital expenditure brings limited success.”

Table 1: To what extent should the library leader have the following management skills?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% Very Great or Great Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating and influencing</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning/thinking</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff management</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project management</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial management, budget</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing priorities in a context of time constraints</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to deal with performance issues</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process management</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: To what extent should the library leader have the following mental skills/attitude?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% Very Great or Great Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership – firmness of direction, decisiveness</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to transform ourselves and our services; ‘the vision thing’</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to see an opportunity and act on it</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical and problem-solving skills</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity in relation to problems and new initiatives</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesising information from various sources</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue sky thinking</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The academic and public library leaders interviewed made the point that leadership is not just a function of position or status but is needed throughout the organisation. One public librarian suggested that this was the result of the development of flatter organisational structures meaning that staff throughout the library service have responsibility for, and ownership of, decision making on a day-to-day basis. Interestingly, given the comments about risk above, he believed this made them less risk-averse, more interested in developing personally and more willing to stand by and learn by their decisions. Comments made in the graduate survey would appear to support this and, picking up on the importance of giving staff responsibility, one respondent stated that leaders needed the “[a]bility to ‘let go’ – the best leaders allow their team to use their own initiative (whilst still being supportive and guiding where necessary).”

When discussing the list of leadership skills identified by Walton, Burke, and Oldroyd, the university and public library leaders interviewed all primarily focused on the “Contextual Awareness” section. In particular, the “Ability to see the big picture and its local relevance” was considered vital and intrinsically linked to both “Awareness of trends” and “Political awareness and sensitivity.” This last skill was emphasized particularly by the public librarians interviewed. One suggested that although everybody had to deal with organisational politics wherever they worked, staff in public sector library services also had direct political contact with elected council members almost on a daily basis. Corporate skills were also highlighted in both the higher education and public sector contexts. One university librarian explained that this involved developing “close relationships with senior managers and having serious engagement with academic leaders” as well as understanding other peoples’ roles. As evident from Table 3, respondents to the graduate survey agreed that the majority of the skills listed under this heading were important.
Table 3: To what extent should the library leader have the following skills and capabilities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% Very Great or Great Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of external trends in sector</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of university structure/operations</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to see the big picture and its local relevance</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political awareness and sensitivity</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 62% of graduate respondents felt that “Political awareness and sensitivity” were of great importance, however, in contrast to the views of the library leaders interviewed. A range of skills which could come under the heading “Communication skills” was highlighted by both the library leaders and the graduates. “Negotiating and influencing” skills were viewed by the library leaders as being intrinsically linked with political skills and of huge importance. As indicated in Table 1, the majority of graduate respondents agreed that they were essential. One university library leader suggested that they were vital to “get people on your side and make sure they support you.” Similarly, in the public library sector this kind of advocacy was stressed as fundamentally important, one library leader describing it as “relation management” and another stressing the importance of not being “isolationist.” Alongside this, partnership working was also identified as crucial by the public library leaders. Good communication skills with all stakeholders was also recognised as vital by the graduates with 100 per cent of them indicating that they thought library leaders needed these to a very great or great extent (see Table 4). Some graduate respondents also chose to highlight the communication skills which they felt were important when asked whether they thought anything was missing from the list in the survey, adding skills such as, “patience and tolerance,” “[t]he ability to deal with staff’s personal issues,” “[a]bility to manage consultation with staff and process feedback,” suggesting that they felt that leaders needed to be exceptional at staff relationship management. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that leaders needed the ability to inspire and motivate staff.

Table 4: To what extent should the library leader have the following interpersonal skills?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% for Very Great or Great Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good communicating with internal/external ‘audiences’</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tact</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion, kindness and respect</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional robustness</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick skin</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, none of the university library leaders made any reference to professional librarianship skills but two of the public librarians maintained that library leaders needed a mix of professional and managerial skills, one suggesting that they had to be able to understand the services that they represent. As shown in Table 5, a relatively high percentage of the graduate respondents agreed that leaders needed professional competence to a very great or great extent.

**Table 5:** To what extent should the library leader have the following mental skills/attitude?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% for Very Great or Great Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of trends and innovations in the LIS context</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise in professional competence</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with current technological developments</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT skills</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in the Introduction, there have been various national initiatives to address a perceived deficiency in library leadership. The university library leaders were divided on the usefulness and efficacy of these. Two thought them expensive and of limited value while the other two reported that training course participants had been “really influenced” and had “found them invaluable.” The public library leaders interviewed all thought the Leading Modern Public Libraries programme had been useful and had had a beneficial effect, although one of the public library leaders interviewed felt that sometimes the wrong people had been sent just because there were places available, rather than because they had leadership potential and that the benefit in these cases was questionable. One of the public librarians, while acknowledging that the programme had been useful, still felt that it had been limited:

> It gave people a bit more confidence but what it didn’t do was give them that extra bit of ‘oomph’ which meant they could mix with the politicians, mix with strategic directors and chief execs and until we manage to do that, there will always be others who will take those top leadership roles.

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The graduates surveyed were asked how they had acquired their leadership skills and the three most common responses were: experience; training; and, observing colleagues and senior management. Practical working experience, in particular, was identified as important in gaining the necessary skills although this had clearly been more comfortable for some that others, one respondent stating that s/he had acquired the skills through, “Being ‘thrown in the deep end’ to sink or swim!” and another through “learning by my mistakes or wrong judgement calls at work.” This supports the comments made above on the importance of giving staff responsibility, even if it meant they made mistakes, because these could become development opportunities. Training and development, including Chartership, were also highlighted as valuable, one respondent explaining:

Chartership … has been useful in providing me [with] ‘space’ and added motivation to reflect on weaknesses and strengths in strategy and policy.

Some of the library leaders spoke of the responsibility that they had, as service leaders, to identify and nurture leadership talent, one saying:

What I want to do is spot the people who have got a future and will do good things and you know that the time you invest with them will produce good things later on.

Many of the graduates also emphasised the importance of working with, or alongside, more experienced managers or leaders for the development of skills, one noting the value of “observing experienced and capable leaders, discussing policy options with them.” Reading professional literature was also mentioned a number of times, particularly in relation to maintaining an awareness of trends within the profession. Three respondents stated that their educational experiences (including their Masters librarianship qualification) had enabled them to acquire theoretical and analytical skills, but the overall impression was that respondents believed that leadership skills were best learnt “[t]he hard way – getting it wrong sometimes, getting it right others – learning and adapting.”

The graduate survey concluded by asking respondents whether they had any further comments about leadership in the library profession. A range of comments was received, some of them focusing on the extent to which leadership could be taught through library/information science degrees. One respondent said, for example:

I think leadership skills come with experience, and it may be quite difficult to teach more than the very basics in the theoretical environments like the ILM course. They are the kind of things that need to be taught through courses at work, or mentoring at work, so that they can then be put into practise on a daily basis immediately.
CONCLUSION

We can conclude that there was some dissonance between library managers’ and graduates’ views of the leadership skills required by library leaders although both sets of respondents agreed that leadership was a quality vital to the profession and one which was increasing in importance due to changes in the internal and external environments within which libraries operate. The evidence from the graduate survey suggests, however, that those who might be expected to lead their organisations and the profession in years to come are not confident of their abilities in this regard. One of the university library leaders felt that having the right personality was key to being an effective leader and, specifically, having ambition and confidence was considered vital by many of the interviewees and yet these qualities were not particularly evident among the graduates surveyed. The numbers responding to the survey were small which precludes any rigorous statistical analysis by year but there did not seem to be any correlation between the graduates’ opinion of the strength of their leadership skills and year of graduation. It might be expected, for example, that those with longer work experience would have had the opportunity to develop more of the skills listed, but this did not generally seem to be the case; respondents in all year groups were, by and large, reserved about their leadership talents.

Another area of disagreement focused on the skills of “Political awareness and sensitivity”. Although all the library leaders interviewed emphasised that leaders have to be able to engage with organisational politics and/or political policies at a local and national level, the graduates surveyed seemed to be either unaware of this or underestimated its importance. Similarly, only 46% (the lowest percentage for any of the skills) felt that “Risk taking” was a skill that library leaders needed to a very great or great extent. The quote from one of the respondents in the results section above suggests that the term “risk” may be viewed by the graduates in a negative light, with connotations of danger and threat. In fact, as one of the public library leaders indicated, the public sector generally is increasingly trying to attract people with an entrepreneurial attitude, those “who can see an opportunity and are willing to take a bit of a risk to achieve it.” Perhaps the language of the private sector, used increasingly in the public sector, was off-putting to many of our graduates working in public service organisations.

An interesting issue of debate picked up in some of the responses from both the library leaders and the graduates is the extent to which it is felt that leadership skills can be taught/learned. Some of the responses suggest that our respondents agreed with the adage that “leaders are born, not made” and yet there was considerable support for the notion that many of the requisite skills are acquired through experience. Leadership or management courses were also considered useful. Although the value of learning about leadership in an academic environment was queried, respondents did seem to think that students should be at least introduced to the concept of leadership on a theoretical basis; this basic understanding of
leadership could then be developed and enhanced through work experience and professional development courses and opportunities. One of the difficulties of teaching leadership in a classroom setting identified by some of the graduates was that it was perceived as essentially context-specific, one respondent noting “the exact mix of skills will depend on the sector.” This discussion raises the question of the implications of the results of this research for those of us educating the LIS professionals and leaders of the future. It is clear that students must be given an awareness of the importance of leadership within the profession and yet the skills mix required or considered desirable is daunting. While some can undoubtedly be acquired through training, others are more intangible and more difficult to pass on. As noted above, the library leaders suggested that confidence and ambition were the key to effective leadership, but the extent to which these can be gained through academic study is debatable.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**Questionnaire using the leadership skills identified by Walton, Burke, and Oldroyd.**

Using a Likert scale, questions 2-34 asked respondents to select from the following choices: 
*Very great extent, Great extent, Moderate extent, Slight extent, Not at all.*

1. **When did you graduate from the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University** *(choices by year over the range 2001 -2007).*

   To what extent should the library leader have the following skills and capabilities?

2. Knowledge of university structure/ operations
3. ‘Political awareness’ and sensitivity
4. Awareness of external trends in sector
5. Ability to see the big picture and its local relevance

To what extent should the library leaders have the following interpersonal skills?

6. Good communicating with internal/external ‘audiences’
7. Tact
8. Compassion, kindness and respect
9. Thick skin
10. Emotional robustness
To what extent should library managers have the following management skills?
12. Staff management
13. Project management
14. Strategic planning/thinking
15. Negotiating and influencing
16. Time management
17. Change management
18. Managing priorities in a context of time constraints
19. Ability to deal with performance issues
20. Organisational skills
21. Financial management, budgets
22. Process management

To what extent should the library leaders have the following mental skills/attitude?
22. Leadership – firmness of direction, decisiveness
23. Flexibility
24. Blue sky thinking
25. Analytical and problem-solving skills
26. Willingness to transform ourselves and our services; ‘the vision thing’
27. Synthesising information from various sources
28. Creativity in relation to problems and new initiatives
29. Risk taking
30. Ability to see an opportunity and act on it

To what extent should the library leaders have the following technical skills?
31. Familiarity with current technological developments.
32. Expertise in professional competence
33. Awareness of trends and innovations in the LIS context
34. IT skills

Open ended questions
35. To what extent do you have the leadership skills listed above?
36. How have you acquired the leadership skills?
37. Are the leadership skills missing in the above list? If so what are they?
38. Please detail below any other comments you may have about the leadership skills needed by librarians.