



Leadership and Libraries: Status Quo and Emerging Trends

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Leadership and Libraries: Status Quo and Emerging Trends

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been studied by scholars for decades. There is no one definition of leadership that is universally accepted, and the concept is often interpreted differently in different contexts and sectors. As a result, leaders can face challenges in leading effectively and ethically in their roles. This article aims to critically examine the concept of leadership from an academic lens. It will review relevant literature and research on leadership, and discuss the different ways in which leadership can be understood and practiced. The article will also explore the challenges and dilemmas that leaders face, and offer some suggestions for how these challenges can be overcome. The article concludes by asserting that leadership is a critical component of any successful organization, and that it is essential for leaders to be cognizant of the challenges they may encounter and the responsibilities they must fulfill.

Keywords: Leadership, Academic Libraries

When I was invited to write an article about leadership, I was initially uncertain about what leadership really means. The concept of leadership is elusive and multifaceted, and its application varies across different contexts and sectors. In non-profit associations, members have the opportunity to vote and elect their own leaders who have paid membership dues and served as volunteers in assuming some duties and providing services. However, non-profit institution employees do not have the same opportunity to choose their own managers or executive leaders, who are usually hired by direct supervisors or one more level up. When scrutinizing leadership in a for-profit corporation environment, the evaluation criteria should be completely different compared to others, as their leaders' focus could be customer-oriented and profit-driven, evaluated by investors and the board. Like many readers of this journal, we all apply, interview, and are offered academic positions that are evaluated by a committee but the final decision is made by the hiring managers. We receive paychecks that are paid by students' tuition, agency funding, and taxpayers' money. Therefore, we should all be obligated to offer our professional knowledge and services to the academic community and the advancement of knowledge and society. Notwithstanding, I also face challenges and dilemmas in navigating the complex and dynamic landscape of leadership in my salary-based and non-elected position. In this article, I aim to explore the notion of leadership from an academic perspective, drawing on relevant literature and research.

I also hope to shed some light on this topic and stimulate further discussion and reflection among the readers of this journal.

Leadership is a contextual term with distinct definitions and meanings in different environments (Martin, 2019); however, all kinds of leadership trainings, seminars, presentations, and courses seem to have a homogeneous prescription of what successful leadership is based on a community-shared recipe for leadership studies (Alvesson, 2020). Leadership scholars, as many critiques observed, generally produce beautiful images to define leadership as broadly good (Spoelstra & ten Bo, 2011), that misguided practitioners to believe leadership only exists in the good. While if it's not good, it shouldn't be called leadership but something else, such as supervision (Hannah et al., 2014), or even worse, tyranny (Jackson & Parry, 2008). As a result, leadership appears as more like an ideological solution than practical (Alvesson & Karrena, 2016; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019; Tourish, 2019), that the "word simply can't wait any longer for more authentic leaders and leadership" (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014, p.353). The success of leadership approaches is disputed, however, due to ambiguous constructs and a lack of empirical support (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Fischer, 2018). Granted, the dominance of popular leadership theories, such as Transformational Leadership and Authentic Leadership, are still highly influential in academia despite their weakness (Gardner et al, 2020; Tourish, 2019), at least in the U.S. according to Alvesson (2020). Consequently, the prosperity of these flimsy leadership theories hypnotizes credulous leadership practitioners to embrace the prescribed formula and to pay for lecturing and consulting using their positive messages, hoping to produce a wealth of positive outcomes for employees and the organization (Alvesson, 2020).

Fisher (2018) points out that the leadership style research lacks realism and the constructs are ambiguous, whereas the proliferation of misleading leadership styles in practice makes the practitioners disinclined to consider a more realistic picture of organizations, work, management, tasks, and objectives (Alvesson, 2020). Martin (2019) called it the romance of leadership, which was created by the leadership literature to weigh heavy on inspirational stories but light on real-world applications. In reality, organizational operation is more often characterized as administrative, managerial, and supervisory work, falling short of expectations for prescribed leadership approaches (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Studies show that managers and senior executives do not often emerge well from the employees' perspective and are in fact associated with many negative perceptions (Cunha et al., 2009; Einarsen et al., 2007), such as toxic or destructive (Einarsen et al., 2007; Kaiser & Craig, 2014); hence, those in managerial roles are not typically seen as leaders by their subordinates (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019). Conflating leadership and management neglects the fact that managers spend more time on daily operations and managerial work than on something distinctively involving leadership (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), which is understood as managing meaning, influencing thinking and feeling (Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017), in contrast to management, which involves a more substantial process with authority (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006).

I am not a scholarly expert devoted to leadership studies, but I understand that leadership has all kinds of variants in essentially different organizations, for-profit or non-profit, governmental or non-governmental, industrial or academic, volunteer-based associations or employment-based institutions. It is critically important for leaders to position right their own expectations in the associated essence of the organizations they work for, because "one environment might call for a leader to be direct, assertive, and top down. A different environment, however, requires a leader to build consensus, use diplomacy, and allow for bottom up action"

(Martin, 2019, p.15). Regarding libraries or academic libraries specifically, the mixed essence of academic, non-profit, employment-based institutions determines the operation of the organizations to be a mixture of both top-down and bottom-up management culture. Although the research on library leadership has not come to a consensus on the leadership skills needed to be successful, a recent study (Martin, 2018) about academic librarians' perceptions of leadership shows that future library leaders are expected to be, in order, people-first, visionary, change agents, experienced librarians, role models, and communicators. In these themes, millennials value the theme of change agent the most, and Gen-Xers the theme of communication. The findings cannot be claimed to represent all academic librarians, but considering the highly-shared culture among academic libraries, it does provide some common ground for library leaders to consider developing the skillsets.

In meeting the expectations and beyond that, library leaders should also look into the future when more rapid technological iterations might drastically influence the profession, and library leaders should be prepared with the needed skillsets and functionality to lead libraries for those who will remain in the profession and be impacted, and also address some of the highlighted expectations expressed in the above-mentioned survey result, which are people-first, visionary, and change agents. Libraries are very different from what they used to be a decade ago, and will be more different in the near future from what they are now, but the "skewing older ARL librarians" status quo indicates a lack of youth and fresh ideas to take on leadership roles (Martin, 2018). Nevertheless, the change will not stop for librarianship. There has been a significant shift from a "purely traditional manner of librarianship to a more agile, innovative, and digital way of doing things" (Ashiq, et al., 2021, p.1). The respondents in the above-mentioned survey also recognize that librarianship will be filled with change in the near future from the mission, equipment, personnel skillsets, and service models (Martin, 2018). The call for library leaders to be visionary and change agents require library leaders to actively participate in, instead of responding to, the change of the broader landscape of higher education and research ecosystem (ACRL, 2019).

Many studies discovered that the rapid changes in information technologies and patron needs being faced by the library leadership remained the most fundamental challenges for the profession (Ashiq, Rehman, & Mujtaba, 2020; Madge & Robu, 2019), but most libraries were still trying to adhere to the traditional roles (Le, 2015; Wong & Chan, 2018) that had failed to meet the needs and expectations of their modern library patrons (Ashiq, Usmani, & Naeem, 2022; Hicks & Given, 2013), which further added to the stress of library leaders trying to demonstrate library values to their users and the upper management (Harland et al., 2017; Le, 2016). According to Wolff-Eisenberg (2017), library leaders felt "increasingly less valued by, involved with, and aligned strategically with other senior academic leadership (p.4)," of which sentiments lead to feelings of inferiority within the academic organizational hierarchy and result in a lack of commitment to provide effective services (Ashiq et al., 2018; Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017). Pinfield et al. (2017) criticize that library leaders are risk-averse and lack creativity and imagination, and Martin (2016) added that library leaders are not fully committed to change due to the possibility of failure.

Risk-taker is not a term usually associated with librarianship or library leaders, but the expected perceptions of future library leaders from both inside and outside of librarianship suggest that stakeholders would like to see new services, projects, or ideas to be implemented, which, involve risks. Apparently, the profession seems to call for leaders who are open to and comfortable

with a certain level of risky changes, and further, to expect leaders to create, facilitate, and lead those changes (Hesselbein, 2010). Moreover, the ARL survey of the library directors and deans indicates an impending retirement and transition in leadership (Wilder, 2017), which opens a window to examine the assumptions of success in leadership, organizations, and the profession (Martin, 2018). Granted the majority of ARL directors and deans see that the crisis in leadership is looming (Maier, 2016), but the qualifications being sought in the position advertisement of leadership positions are still those in conventional librarianship (Maciel et al., 2018).

It seems that the issues in library leadership not only exhibit the disconnection between leadership theories and realism, but also appear as some contradictions between reality and practice. Despite the profession has been seen in some survival crises, library administrators have continued to focus on conventional skills and transactional management perspectives when recruiting new professionals in libraries (Maciel et al., 2018). By cutting leadership off from its practice in the real world, the library-associated institutions or organizations invested in surveying, acknowledging, analyzing, concluding, and publishing reports while at the same time, library practitioners disconnect from what should be done more and more from the application. Another disconnection between the imagination and reality is that library professionals are reluctant to adopt and embrace the latest developments and become increasingly resistant to changes (Ashiq, et al., 2021; Finley & Kluever, 2009; Hicks & Given, 2013), while in the meantime library professionals have expressed their expectations of future library leaders to create and lead changes in the organizations (Martin, 2018).

The discrepancy between the survey results and the actual practice shows that library employees' activities and reactions are more influenced by their feelings than their rational thoughts (Martin, 2018), and that organizational culture is the main factor that determines whether organizations thrive, fail, innovate, or decline (Martin, 2019). Organizational culture consists of shared values, belief systems, and accepted norms of behaviors, and it evaluates and selects who belongs here (Taylor, 2017). Moreover, the culture becomes more and more dominant when the same process of hiring like-minded people and removing dissenters repeats, thereby creating a uniform value and belief system in the organization (Popper, 2012), restraining dysfunctional culture in an organization from being corrected before the organization deteriorates or fails (Martin, 2019). Some successful leaders who guide organizations to accomplish goals, innovate new solutions, and support the organizational mission may still be seen as poor leaders because they do not fit the expectations of the organizational culture (Bligh, et al., 2011; Martin, 2019).

Changing the real culture – how people behave and manifest their culture – is difficult and protracted mainly because culture poses the greatest resistance. People in a particular field may be hesitant to challenge the status quo or question the norm because they are part of it; however, sometimes challenging the status quo is necessary (Alvesson, 2020). When a leader considers transforming the culture, leader must accentuate essential organizational values. It can start from leaders' being able to create values and ascertain their values are not altered or obscured in a multitude of other competing values created by informal leaders in that existent culture (Grint, 2010). A leader must also be able to persuade the informal leaders of the library to adopt and disseminate the new cultural values. Cultural members have to perceive the reasons for change as credible and valid, and their acceptance of new values will depend at least partially on how the new values benefit their work and if they will be compensated for adopting these new values (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Schein (2004) posits that the approach can be effective for mid-life stagnant organizations; however, it may be necessary to undertake a comprehensive turnover of personnel

for highly dysfunctional cultures. It should be noted, though, that very few leaders have been able to effectuate holistic and enduring culture change that many organizations often profess they desire (Martin, 2019).

For leaders, when considering the moral implications of what is deemed good or legitimate within an organization, it is important to ask: for whom is it good and in what way? Hence, it is imperative for libraries to adopt a new perspective on leadership and organizational effectiveness. The idealized notion of leadership must be dispelled in favor of a more pragmatic and sophisticated approach. While culture, environment, and mission are significant drivers of the organization's progress, a library leader's role is to possess a philosophical outlook that guides decision-making, to remind the library of its purpose, to reinterpret that purpose as necessary, and to ensure that the library's work aligns with its values. In essence, the primary function of a leader is to provide direction and clarity regarding the organizational *raison d'être* and objectives, irrespective of the variety, setting, and span of the organization. In doing this, leaders can help their organizations to achieve their full potential and make a positive impact on the communities they serve.

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