Library Leaders: Attributes Compared to Corporate Leaders

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ABSTRACT
A study involving sixty-one library leaders from academic, public, and school libraries, deans and national association executives is described. The interviews sought to compare characteristics of library leaders with those of corporate leaders as identified by Bennis and Nanus (1985).

The four attributes identified in the corporate study were also characteristic of library leaders, but the librarians added the "societal value" of their work as a key motivating factor.

INTRODUCTION
Until recently, the concept of leadership has not been addressed or studied in any concerted way by the library and information profession. Our professional schools have taken very seriously the need to provide thorough grounding in the skills of managing libraries, but leadership has been viewed essentially as a set of unlearnable innate personality characteristics. Not only has the concept been largely ignored, it has been observed by one spokesperson in our field that "leadership, much as we admire it in the abstract, is something we suspect in the specific" (White, 1987, p. 68). Perhaps this attitude explains why relatively little research has been done on the nature of leadership in librarianship.

Except for biographical studies which by no means should be discounted, research on leadership in our field did not begin until very recently, and it has largely centered around the following kinds
of questions: Who are the perceived leaders? To what degree is the meaning of the term *leadership* shared throughout our field? Do those who are perceived as leaders share similar patterns of background/behavior career experiences? To what extent do publishing and participation in professional organizations relate to perceived leadership (Gertzog, 1986)?

Other studies have been done on the behavior of library directors and its effect on the organizational effectiveness of the library (Euster, 1987; Comes, 1979); leadership styles and rate of change in public libraries (Boyd, 1979); and discrepancies between the leaders' self-perception, and perception of their behavior on the part of subordinates (Dragon, 1976; Rike, 1976; Sparks, 1976). A recent dissertation using citation analysis examines the nature of the publication records of Gertzog's 115 leaders (Bandelin, 1991). In addition to the research studies cited, there was increased interest in the topic during the 1980s, mirroring "a perceived leadership crisis throughout the U.S." (Euster, 1989). Several books explored the nature of leadership now and in the future in specific library settings (Woodsworth & Von Wahlde, 1988; Riggs, 1982; Riggs & Sabine, 1988). Margaret Chisholm, president of the American Library Association 1987-88, chose, as the theme of the annual conference, "Developing Leadership in Human Resources for Library and Information Science" and the various divisions of ALA, particularly the Library Administration and Management Association, held programs and commissioned a variety of papers on the subject.

Between 1987 and 1990, this author conducted a study whose objective was to replicate the research methodology of Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus (1985) in *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. The study sought to determine whether Bennis and Nanus's findings concerning the characteristics of corporate leaders are also applicable to library leaders. The premise was that a more precise understanding of the qualities and behavior of library leaders would mean that teachers and students of library management/leadership would no longer have to rely on corporate leadership behavior as the model for leadership behavior in libraries. However, the general hypothesis was that differences, if any, between corporate and library leaders are insignificant.

Bennis and Nanus had interviewed ninety leaders, sixty CEOs, all corporate presidents or chairmen of boards, and thirty leaders from the public sector. From these interviews, the authors developed four strategies or "kernels of truth" that seemed to characterize all ninety of the leaders.

For the library study, sixty-one librarians were interviewed. Most met one or more of the following criteria: director of a major public
or academic library, nationally recognized school librarian, executive
director of one of the major professional organizations (SLA, ALA,
ARL, etc.), dean of a library school (selected by their peers), or state
librarian. Several other persons who control major resources, or by
reason of their position or professional activities have had a powerful
impact on the profession were also interviewed. Like Bennis and
Nanus who chose from Fortune 500 companies, college presidencies,
etc., the selection of these individuals was intended to be representative
but by no means inclusive. Sixty other library "leaders" would have
been equally appropriate.

The interviews asked the same questions as Bennis and Nanus:
(1) What are your strengths? Weaknesses? (2) Was there any particular
experience or event in your life that influenced your management
philosophy or style? (3) What were the major decision points in your
career and how do you feel about your choice now? To those questions,
two were added for the library leaders: (4) What, if any, has been
the influence of mentors in your career? and (5) How do you feel
about the future of the profession?

There are, of course, serious limitations to this kind of research,
the most obvious being that it is based on the assumption that the
persons identified as "leaders" have the ability to accurately evaluate
their strengths and weaknesses. Also, one is not measuring behavior
as perceived by others. In fact, many studies using the model of a
leader's self-perception have been shown to be statistically unrelated
to descriptions of the leaders by others.

On the other hand, observation of the leader by others presents
many difficulties as well. It is more than the possible bias of the
observer and the inability to control variables. In any case, even
situational approaches to studying leadership assume that, while the
style of leadership likely to be effective will vary according to the
situation, some leadership styles will be effective regardless of the
situation. Fortified by the encouragement of Warren Bennis and Bert
Nanus, the work proceeded, and the study was completed in the
fall of 1990.

The qualities that Bennis and Nanus identified were four "kernels
of truth" or strategies, or human handling skills that all the leaders
seemed to possess:

1. attention through vision
2. meaning through communication
3. trust through positioning
4. positive self regard

Bennis and Nanus's leaders identified many other qualities that aided
in their success, but these four: (1) intensity (usually concerning the
mission of the organization) that induces others to join in; 
(2) outstanding communication (and listening) skills; (3) ability to 
be consistent and thus develop trust; and (4) self-confidence were 
the four distinguishing traits that emerged over and over again.

Bennis and Nanus's book *Leaders*, the report of their study which 
became an immediate best-seller, contains much overlap. For example, 
the quality of possessing vision overlaps with "meaning through 
communication" and so on. That is, it is essential to have a vision 
but meaningless if one is unable to communicate it to others. In 
categorizing the responses from library leaders, there was infinite 
overlap and redundancy as well, but endless sifting through the 
transcripts produced not only several similar central themes, but also 
a number of unexpected differences between the corporate leaders 
and the library leaders.

In exploring the strengths of the interviewees, findings were very 
similar to those of Bennis and Nanus (1985) who said that every 
single person they interviewed had an agenda, and that "leaders are 
the most results-oriented individuals in the world" (p. 29). The library 
leaders interviewed possess this quality to an enormous degree. Along 
with clear goals, they have personal drive, magnetism, and persistence 
which captures attention, draws people in, and enables them to reach 
their goals.

One of the more clear-cut instances of this ability is the story 
of the emergence of the national library symbol. Elizabeth Stone, 
when she was president of the American Library Association 
(although she was not the first person to suggest the idea), set her 
mind and heart on the adoption of a symbol. When she first broached 
the idea in 1981 during her inaugural address in San Francisco, it 
is safe to say that most of those assembled saw little hope of it being 
accomplished. By 1985, however, it had not only gained the approval 
of the ALA Council and the Federal Highway Commission, but could 
and can be seen on many highways in many states, and in hundreds 
of communities from Alaska to Florida. The blue and white sign 
has become in the United States, in Canada, and elsewhere almost 
as familiar as McDonald's golden arches. As one of Elizabeth Stone's 
associates said: "She has the tenacious spirit to not only articulate 
a goal, but to bring people together, write the letters, make the phone 
calls, and [like a child absorbed in a sand castle] simply persist until 
the job gets done." Literally hundreds of ALA members and other 
librarians worked to make the library symbol a reality, but what 
made it happen was the absolute conviction of Elizabeth Stone that 
it should and could be done.

The second quality identified by Bennis and Nanus is the ability 
to communicate "a shared interpretation of organizational events
so that members know how they are expected to behave...[it] generates a commitment to the primary organizational values and philosophy...serves as a control mechanism, sanctioning or proscribing particular kinds of behavior” (p. 112).

Library leaders seem to understand that intensity of expression: “Client-centered service is my passion” says Liz Stroup, director of the Seattle Public Library. It is a powerful way to shape or reshape the social architecture. The more disagreement there is among staff, the lower the level of consensus about the meaning of “client-centered service,” the lower the degree of commitment. Yet they also understand that there can be a wide variation in how this value is operationalized. The idea is to allow the staff to reshape the social architecture in the sense that how the new rules and regulations should be reshaped is not prescribed.

It was clear from the interviews that the library leaders communicate in many different styles, but they understand that the basic formula for success belongs to the person who: (1) places emphasis on values simply stated and develops one or two understandable themes—themes that then become the dominant message of the organization; (2) has a talent for listening; and (3) understands that the value of power is in sharing it.

Sometimes the message has as much or more to do with the process of giving service as the actual product. Pat Woodrum, director of the Tulsa Public Library, in discussing her staff, said, “we’re a group that support each other in what we do...[we] kind of have a philosophy that we are going to be very positive in everything we do...it’s contagious. If you go to work in the morning and people start smiling at you, you are forced to change your attitude.”

Kanter (1989) has coined the term “segmentalism” for a style that divides the organization into tiny territories and then tells all to stay within these confines (p. 204). The library leaders tend to be extremely accessible to their staffs; they spend time visiting in different departments. It is not a chore for them to spend time listening to individual staff members because they are intensely interested in everything that is going on.

Russell Shank, now assistant vice-chancellor, UCLA, likes to physically move around the library asking many questions: “not trying to learn everything about what a person is doing, or what a department is doing, or what a department is, but questions like ‘why is that over there? Well, explain that to me’ or ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘Do you find that this is kind of stultifying sitting all day at this machine?’ You get engaged in conversation with people, and before long there’s a mosaic of little pieces and parts that get put together in your mind...not asking the global questions, but the bits and pieces to put together a picture of the place.”
Most of the leaders agreed that the ability to listen and interact well is of far more importance than one's ability to make speeches, yet several said that they would wish to be more articulate, to think faster on their feet, and so on. Richard DeGennaro, now director, Harvard College Libraries, spoke of avoiding situations where he would need to speak to large groups early in his career, and he regrets that now. He says, "I'm probably better at communicating in writing" and:

That's my technique for developing my vision for the organization. It's during the process of trying to write out a five-year plan, or to write an article on a subject...it's that process that causes me to know after I've written it, what it is that I believe. Sometimes I start to write one thing and I end up coming out on the opposite side, but in the technique of verbally influencing people and communicating that vision, I do better in small groups and one-on-one conversations and in small group meetings.

While DeGennaro's superb writing skills more than compensate for possible podium inadequacies, there is no doubt that strong public speaking skills are generally viewed as a decided asset by library leaders. Several of them mentioned this quality while enumerating their strengths: "I'm great at giving a speech, out in the public" (Linda Crismond, ALA executive director). "I don't know where I got this attribute, but I think very well on my feet... and so I tend to be at my best at things like budget hearings and presenting proposals where people are asking questions" (F. William Summers, dean of the School of Library and Information Studies, Florida State University).

One of the most articulate of library leaders, Eric Moon, formerly president of Scarecrow Press, confided: "I'm terribly nervous about speaking always...and I don't like doing it, but you have to overcome that fear." Moon then reminisced about his associations with the Library Association, when he was speaking frequently throughout England:

I couldn't get over this nervousness, and they had a speaker there who was one of the senior ministers in the government who was the most fluid, articulate speaker I had ever heard in my life, hardly used a note, so cool. And I went up to him afterwards and said, "God, that was incredible. Would you tell me how you can do that sort of stuff without being nervous?" And he said, "My boy, if ever you get up there and you are not nervous, you won't be worth a damn." So that encouraged me a bit.

Eric Moon then talked about chairing a meeting in New York when John Lindsay was the speaker:

I was sitting next to him when he was at the lectern, and his hands
you learn through experience is how to hide it completely so that people
won't know...and I think I've learned to do that.

Two of the best “off the cuff” speakers (both for content and
articulation) in the profession are Arthur Curley (director, Boston
Public Library) and Grace Slocum (retired director of the Cecil County
Maryland Public Library). Both Curley and Slocum have wonderfully
resonant voices and both were members of the ALA Board. When
they approached the microphone in an ALA Council meeting, they
easily commanded the full attention of a sometimes distracted council.
Overall, although many wish they were more articulate, our library
leaders are accomplished speakers and (at least outwardly) comfortable
at the podium.

The third quality identified by Bennis and Nanus (1985) relates
to trust, which Bennis says is earned by being consistent and
predictable. “We trust people who are predictable, whose positions
are known and who keep at it; leaders who are trusted make themselves
known, make their positions clear” (p. 44). Library leaders maintain
consistency between word and deed. They say what they want to
accomplish and they do what they say. Thus, they are trusted.

Charles Robinson, director of the Baltimore County Library, talks
about it in the context of organizational stability. Noting that he
has been director since 1963 and there has been very little turnover
in top administration (except for his assistant, Jean Barrie Moltz,
who came in 1964), he said:

So there's a lot of continuity here, and there's a lot to be said for the
staff being able to count on you. You do what they expect really in
a way, and so I figure that my successor, whoever she is, is going to
have a tough time; and then her successor will be fine, once they get
rid of the Robinson/Moltz aura around here.

Longevity in one position is one kind of consistency, and it is
legitimate, but it seems more likely that, while Robinson is considered
a risk taker, his staff can usually predict his reaction or behavior
in a variety of circumstances. That is, they know roughly what he
will probably accept, reject, and/or consider further. They also know
he will make decisions that are consistent with his belief that the
public library must never become an elitist institution. This does
not mean that he does not frequently surprise or even shock people.
Robinson is iconoclastic and can be very blunt, a quality that is
often little appreciated, but few would argue against the premise
that he is not only one of the most creative minds in the profession,
but also has had a tremendous influence on the development of public
library service.

Interestingly enough, Robinson does not see himself as creative,
and practically the first thing he said [when asked] in the interview
my greatest strength is hiring the right people to work with and letting them do the job, and another strength is stealing other people's ideas... people often have a good idea and then don't carry it out... I never had a new idea in my life." He then goes on to say: "Much of what I have become infamous for is ideas that have come from folks like Eliot Shelkrot (now Librarian, Free Library of Philadelphia) and Tom Walker (now retired from the Maryland State Library), who dreamed up centralized selection."

Robinson is consistent in that you can be assured that on most issues he will take a position that is in direct contrast to the accepted theory. He says: "I just get impatient with the conventional wisdom. I figure that if it's convention, it's probably wrong." One would think that this philosophy would drive staff crazy, but, in reality, Robinson's somewhat unconventional style seems to work well because he is consistently unconventional, predictably unconventional, and those who work with him adjust to that style, and therefore it works.

If asked, a half-dozen people will probably say that qualities they like in a boss are attributes like "listening skills," "thoughtfulness," "responsiveness," but in fact they often adjust to a person who describes himself as Charles Robinson does: "I'm somewhat impatient, and I'm not particularly thoughtful, kind, or considerate in my treatment of people; I terrorize a lot of people." As one staff member said: "All that's true, but he really has a heart of gold."

Beverly Lynch, now dean of the School of Library and Information Science at UCLA, places a very high value on the ability to speak up and say what is on one's mind, ignoring political expediency. In a public forum, Lynch brings the bad news as well as the good, unearths the problems before presenting the solutions, and this approach has captured the respect of the library profession. Lynch worries about change, but her overriding characteristic is that she says what she will do and does what she says. She has views without which one cannot be consistent, and if the leader has a strong point of view, she will be anticipatory rather than reactive.

Lynch touched on a topic that Bennis sees as essential to effectively "positioning" an organization. Establishing trust for oneself is a very short step from establishing confidence in the organization. Bennis says we do it by "creating a niche in a complex changing environment." Very seldom is this accomplished by assuming a reactive stance; rather, it takes an aggressive proactive look at the needs of clients/potential clients, developing new and better services to meet those needs.

If this is true for the corporate environment, it is doubly important for libraries whose staff must ask themselves: What business
are we in? What values are more important than others? Bennis argues for proactive organizations, and library leaders agree, but they are also very aware of the importance of knowing when to assume a slightly reactive stance in order to keep options open in the light of changing circumstances.

The final quality described by Bennis and Nanus is positive self regard or self-confidence. Library leaders all have this quality. They exude success and, when asked, were not hesitant to discuss their strengths. For most, the first strength mentioned had to do with human skills, most often the ability to work well with others to mobilize people for accomplishment of goals.

As Robert Hayes, professor and former dean at UCLA Library School, put it: "One of my strengths is I have respect for the people I deal with—the faculty and the students...a second strength is that I am very open and honest with persons in the administration and faculty and the outside world...the results of that is an administration that believes what I tell them. They have no reason to doubt it."

For many of the leaders, their greatest strength is that they are, in the best sense of the word, predictable. E.J. Josey, now professor at the University of Pittsburgh, is one. Josey has consistently and fearlessly championed the cause of human rights, both in his local community and in the American Library Association.

Peggy Sullivan, now director of libraries, Northern Illinois University, describes herself as a "populist...the ability to find out what the people want, to listen, and to make decisions." Eric Moon said:

I suppose if I had to name one [strength] it would be lack of fear. I have a tendency, perhaps too much of a tendency, to say what I believe, whatever the consequences, to do whatever I believe, whatever the consequences. And that has brought me a lot of friends over the years, and it's also brought me a lot of enemies, but I don't believe you can get change, real change, accomplished unless you are prepared to do that.

Herbert White, professor and former dean at Indiana, lists his number one strength as energy. "I do not postpone and I have the courage and willingness to tackle the problems."

The leaders are not boastful, but their quiet innate sense of self-worth comes through immediately. It does not however manifest itself in an egotistical way. Rather, the leaders are almost modest; it is as if in their answers they are trying to clarify what works for them as much for themselves as for the interviewer.

The library leaders interviewed did exhibit the qualities of corporate leaders as described by Bennis and Nanus (1985), but there were also differences. The corporate leaders can and do find that their work is meaningful, satisfying, and even important for mankind,
but the bottom line in the corporate world is outcome, and outcome translates into profits. The library leaders have a deep and intense belief that what they are doing is not only satisfying but deeply significant. "The thing I love about librarianship is its infinite possibilities," says Millicent (Penny) Abel, university librarian at Yale. "A noble profession," says Pat O'Brian, librarian at Dallas. Gary Strong, state librarian of California, says, "I really get irritated with those who do not have the passion of the profession...we are managing an institution that's very, very special. It's not a widget shop."

The library leaders are visionary but they recognize that it is not necessary to be a highly original thinker to be considered a visionary. The skill is to be able to take an idea, give it substance, life, credibility, focus attention on it, gather support for it, and then persist until it is accomplished.

Along with this, the leaders understand that it doesn't take extraordinary ability and talent to be extraordinarily successful. Just being slightly superior will make a vast difference. They recognize that the margin of difference in being slightly superior is most often realized through hard work and long hours rather than creativity and talent.

Our leaders very often have to go out on a limb, take risks, commit themselves to an idea/goal that may seem impossible to others. Making the decision to go forward, being the pacesetter, can sometimes be lonely. In such times, leaders have to be secure, self-confident with the inner resources to trust themselves. This is where the nature of the work, its intrinsic worth, its service orientation, provides a tremendous boost to library leaders. Corporate interviewees simply did not express a similar "passion for the profession."

It is significant that all but two of the sixty leaders had mentors and/or role models to help shape their careers. Very often this process began in library school. Kathleen Heim, now graduate dean at Louisiana State University, said, "my good fortune at Chicago was to fall under the influence of Lester Asheim, who made the difference for me: he was rigorous and he made me write...that activity of writing a thesis under Asheim was critical. It made the difference between my just going out and working and having a thoughtful career."

One common thread is apparent in talking with leaders: their mentor or role model emerged very early in their careers. Frequently they were identified as having leadership potential if not in library school, then on their first job. The implication here is that every job, even the very first job, is important.

The library leaders interviewed are very much in tune with current management trends; they have been among the first to shift away from a somewhat mechanical model of planning and efficiency
focused primarily on assessing needs, selling goals, etc. The new approaches do not throw out the systematic approach but they place much more emphasis on creativity, risk taking, innovation, and even intuition. The library leaders were found to be the opposite of cool, aloof, and analytical; rather, they are passionate, intense, caring, and kind.

What are the implications of these findings for professional schools of library and information science? How can they create curricula and environments that foster these elusive leadership qualities? What are the implications for continuing education for the information profession? These questions should be of major and immediate concern to library and information science educators since, currently, schools rely heavily on technical skills and theoretical concepts, sidestepping the behavioral attributes that are crucial to the development of leaders.

REFERENCES


