
The Changing Role of the Middle Manager in Research Libraries

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ABSTRACT

THE EXTENSIVE IMPLEMENTATION of technology in the workplace, recent efforts to reduce levels of hierarchy, the need to reduce the number of positions in many organizations, and the introduction of self-managing work groups have led to speculation that the middle manager will disappear. This article disputes this prediction and, instead, proposes that the role is undergoing a transformation. The author draws on her experience in conducting the Library Management Skills Institutes offered by the Association of Research Libraries' Office of Management Services to describe the new role and responsibilities of the middle manager in research libraries. The article concludes with a list of the skills and abilities that will be critical for the effective middle manager in the future.

INTRODUCTION

One predicted outcome of the application of information technology is the disappearance of middle managers in organizations. Recent efforts to downsize, rightsize, reframe, or restructure organizations to manage with fewer staff resources and reduce the number of levels in the organizational hierarchy have reinforced the notion that the middle management level will cease to exist in the next decade. The experience of some organizations that have implemented self-managing or self-directed work groups also has caused further warnings about the potential elimination of the middle manager in the organization of the future. This is not likely to happen

in most organizations, especially in research libraries. The organizational changes now underway indicate the need for transformation of the middle manager's role rather than its disappearance.

THE MIDDLE MANAGER'S ROLE

In 1989, the *Harvard Business Review* reprinted the article, "General Managers in the Middle," written by Hugo Uytterhoeven (1972). The article, which provides an apt description of the middle manager's role and its difficulties almost twenty years after its original publication, reveals that the work of today's middle manager in research libraries still has many of the characteristics identified by Uytterhoeven.

Accomplishing Goals by Managing Relationships

Department heads in research libraries accomplish a great deal of their work by "managing relationships." Managing relationships at this level requires attention to three critical sets of people identified by Uytterhoeven: (1) staff reporting to the manager, (2) colleagues or other peers in the library, and (3) senior management. In addition, many middle managers in libraries have a set of external relationships to manage. Faculty, students, scholars, university administrators, donors, vendors, and professional colleagues in other libraries are some examples of these external relationships. These relationships form a complex network with various requirements for communication, time spent, and needs to be met. Expectations vary and sometimes are in conflict.

Functioning as "Playing Coach"

Middle managers in research libraries continue to carry out the traditional functions of managers and also perform some of the work of the unit for which they are responsible. Uytterhoeven describes the "playing-coach" job as one in which the manager is both a delegator and a doer, a strategist and an operator, and a long-range planner as well as an immediate implementer. The middle manager needs to operate both in the arena of senior management (the coaches) and that of the staff (the players). He or she needs the knowledge and skills to function effectively with both groups and the flexibility to shift from one to the other.

Responsibility for Translating Goals into Action

As more research libraries engage in strategic planning, more department heads find they are required to help implement the overall goals of the library by formulating specific goals and objectives for their own departments. This process of translating goals into action to achieve results requires communication, interpretation, and

explanation. The department head plays a critical role in developing staff commitment to the overall goals of the library. He or she also must ensure that departmental and individual performance goals are congruent with those of the library as a whole.

Importance of Responsibility and Authority

Historically, administrators in research libraries have delegated a great deal of responsibility to department heads. Often, however, this responsibility has not been accompanied by the requisite authority. Uytterhoeven (1972) describes this "responsibility-authority discrepancy" as an "inevitable fact of life" (p. 140). While many middle managers in research libraries have accepted this imbalance, they remain frustrated by its consequences and their lack of skill in dealing with the results. Operating with more responsibility and limited authority means that decisions may be subject to change by senior management, staff may be successful in persuading senior management to overturn decisions, and interdepartmental competition and conflict arise. As a result, some department heads become reluctant to make decisions or to act.

Uytterhoeven's article contains a "retrospective commentary." In this commentary, he notes several changes that he has observed in the intervening period. He too does not foresee the demise of the role. He recognizes that the "difficulty of the job of the manager in the middle has increased," the "gap between the characteristics of the 'top' and the 'middle level' general management jobs has widened," and "consensus management has become essential" (p. 141). Uytterhoeven's general observations certainly hold true for the majority of middle managers who work in research libraries.

Kanter (1989) has observed and described the developments and changes in the manager's role and responsibilities for the past fifteen years. In her description of the "new managerial work" in the "postentrepreneurial" organization, she identifies five "elements" of postentrepreneurial organizations:

1. There are a greater number and variety of channels for taking action and exerting influence.
2. Relationships of influence are shifting from the vertical to the horizontal, from chain of command to peer networks.
3. The distinction between managers and those managed is diminishing, especially in terms of information, control over assignments, and access to external relationships.
4. External relationships are increasingly important as sources of internal power and influence, even of career development.
5. As a result of the first four changes, career development has become less intelligible, but also less circumscribed. There are fewer assured routes to success, which produces anxiety. At the same time, career paths are more open to innovation, which produces opportunity. (p. 88)

The research library may not be seen easily as a "postentrepreneurial" organization but it is. Kanter applies the term to a set of "emerging practices...that involve the application of entrepreneurial creativity and flexibility to established businesses" (p. 85). Substitute organization or research library for "business" and the description fits. Managerial work in today's research library contains each of the five elements.

Most research libraries today are organized as multilevel hierarchies with corresponding multiple levels of supervision. Most first level supervisors and a number of middle managers perform some of the work of the unit for which they are responsible. Many of these supervisors and managers were selected for their positions because of their functional expertise, not because of a proven ability to supervise or manage. The middle manager is typically at the department head level and reports to an assistant, associate, or deputy librarian. As a department head, the middle manager is responsible for a major unit and function but frequently does not have direct control over the resources necessary for managing the unit. He or she may or may not have complete authority to select staff, exercise discipline, plan and organize the work of the unit, and determine the most effective way to operate on a day-to-day basis. The department head in today's research library seldom has full control over the expenditure of the budget for the department, the freedom to hire staff as needed, or the ability to reorganize the department.

The extensive use of integrated information systems has significantly changed the work performed and the way it is accomplished in research libraries. Many more support staff perform computer-mediated work which requires more abstract thinking and judgment at the computer terminal. This work presents more problems that must be solved immediately at the terminal by the individual, with limited opportunity for consultation or direction from the manager. Library managers have less direct knowledge of the work they supervise and rely more on staff doing this work to solve problems on the spot. There is little time to refer all problems arising from this work to the manager for decisions, nor is the manager able to make these decisions. Frequently it is the staff performing this work who have the necessary information and more relevant experience for problem solving. Staff act as resources for each other and often train each other to perform new work assignments. As the manager's role shifts from one of direction and control to one of guidance and coordination, the role of staff shifts from that of subordinate to a partner or participant in the accomplishment of work and the achievement of organizational goals.

The staff now working in these libraries are interested in making a contribution beyond the performance of their individual jobs. Many bring knowledge, skills, and abilities beyond what is required and want to make a career of their work in libraries. Some who work

at the senior levels of technical or paraprofessional levels challenge the distinction made between the librarian's work and what they are doing.

In many libraries, the support staff is more culturally diverse than the professional staff and managerial staff. Often the middle manager supervises staff who are older, more experienced, and more knowledgeable. In some cases, the staff supervised are better educated as well. Staff expect job satisfaction, and, for many, a key component of this satisfaction is the opportunity to do work that is significant and that makes an important contribution to the library.

THE NEW ROLE FOR THE MIDDLE MANAGER

Kanter (1989) describes a model of the "new managerial work" that:

consists of looking outside a defined area of responsibility to sense opportunities and of forming project teams drawn from any relevant sphere to address them. It involves communication and collaboration across functions, across divisions, and across companies whose activities and resources overlap. Thus rank, title, or official charter will be less important factors in the success of the new managerial work than having the knowledge, skills, and sensitivity to mobilize people and motivate them to do their best. (p. 92)

These have emerged as the key factors for the successful manager in today's libraries.

Evidence of the changes in the middle manager's role in libraries and the skills required for effective performance in this new role can be found in the experience of the Library Management Skills Institutes. The Association of Research Libraries' Office of Management Services (ARL/OMS) established its organizational training and staff development program in 1973. The foundation of this program has been the Library Management Skills Institute, which has been attended by more than 2,000 library managers. The needs, interests, and capabilities of these managers have changed over the years.

A decade ago, most participants in the Library Management Skills Institute were at the department head or higher level and tended to work in public services departments. For many, their management responsibilities were secondary to the professional work they performed. Often the individual was appointed to the management position based on competence in the performance of responsibilities as a reference librarian, a cataloger, or an archivist and not because he or she possessed the skills and abilities required to be a successful manager. In fact, in some cases these managers resented their "management" responsibilities and the time it took away from the performance of their "real" responsibilities. The decision to assume

management responsibility was based on a desire to advance and earn a higher salary, not an interest in the work itself.

Recent participants in the Library Management Skills Institute come from all areas of the library organization. They usually have chosen to be managers in their libraries because it was something they wanted to do and they believe they are successful in their work. A large percentage work in technical services. Managers who are not librarians are greater in number. Often support staff who are supervisors attend and the other participants are not aware of this. Most participants like the challenges posed by supervising a staff who want to participate and contribute. They demonstrate the energy and stamina necessary to manage in a changing environment. Many have read about management and supervision. Some have completed course work or earned degrees in management or human resource development.

A critical difference between current participants and those of ten or more years ago is that today's manager has chosen the work because it was what he or she wanted to do. Each tends to have a strong desire to be the best manager possible and an abiding interest in their own development and that of their staff.

A key issue that has emerged during the discussions in these institutes in the past year is the need to be more effective in influencing those at higher levels in the library. This is described broadly to include assistant or associate directors, personnel administrators, budget and finance officers, the library director, as well as the manager's immediate supervisor. The purpose behind this desire is to persuade the more senior managers of the necessity to respond to changing needs, to provide information about day-to-day operations and the problems that occur, to have better working relationships with senior management, and to be more effective themselves as they integrate library goals and plans with the work of their department. They seem to have a desire to become the more effective "junior partner" as described by Cohen and Bradford (1990, p. 252) in *Influence without Authority*.

The emerging role of the effective middle manager in academic libraries is one that involves being an innovator or "idea entrepreneur" (Kanter, 1982), a developer (Bradford & Cohen, 1984), a team leader (Zenger, 1991), a coach who operates within an "acknowledge-create-empower" paradigm (Evered & Selman, 1989), as well as a "SuperLeader" (Manz & Sims, 1989) who "leads others to lead themselves." Each of these models offers a useful framework for understanding how to be effective in the new role. Together they present a model for the middle manager to follow.

Kanter (1986) has done a considerable amount of research and writing about the changing role of the middle manager in organizations in the United States. A particular theme in her work during the past ten years has been the shift from the traditional

role of an "approver or message carrier" to one as an innovator or "idea entrepreneur" (p. 19). The successful manager continually seeks to improve work structures, processes, and performance. Creative thinking and skills in problem solving are critical.

The Manager-as-Developer model was created by Bradford and Cohen (1984) from their study of leaders who had achieved excellence. The distinguishing characteristic of these leaders was their belief in sharing responsibility and control with subordinates. "At the same time that the manager works to develop management responsibility in subordinates, he or she must help develop the subordinates abilities to share management of the unit's performance" (pp. 60-61).

Acting on this belief, "tapping subordinate talents, exciting them about mission, and building effective teams" (Bradford & Cohen, 1984, p. 60) are the core behaviors of the manager. This model recognizes that a critical responsibility of the manager is to develop the skills and abilities of the staff and that this development will take time. The manager leads a team that develops as individual members learn to perform their work and establish effective working relationships, become committed to the goals of the library, assume self-responsibility for performance, and work to achieve their potential.

The importance of staff involvement in problem solving and decision making and the need to do much of this work in groups has led to the formation of work groups, self-managing teams, semi-autonomous teams, clusters, even "swat teams" in libraries. In many cases, these groups have been given tasks and responsibilities formerly assigned to managers. As a result, the manager becomes a group or team leader.

In a recent article, Zenger et al. (1991) discuss their views on how the manager's role is changing and suggest a model for a "new kind of team leader" (p. 48). Zenger is the president of Zenger-Miller, an international training and consulting firm. The firm's leadership training program has been implemented in several universities.

This new team leader has the traditional skills expected of an effective manager. For today's workplace, he or she also is an innovator, as suggested by Kanter, and a developer, described by Bradford and Cohen. Zenger et al. add still another layer—the set of behaviors and skills needed to build and maintain a team environment. This third set recognizes the extensive use of groups in many organizations.

The five skills for the team leader are: (1) developing self-motivated staff who set their own goals and evaluate their own efforts; (2) helping diverse people to generate and implement their own best ideas; (3) building teams that manage more of their own day-to-day work; (4) championing cross-functional efforts to improve quality, service, and productivity; and (5) anticipating, initiating, and

responding to changes dictated by forces outside the organization (Zenger et al., 1991, p. 48).

Evered and Selman (1989) argue for a new leadership paradigm—i.e., the “acknowledge-create-empower” philosophy as opposed to the traditional managerial philosophy which they describe as the “control-order-prescriptive” paradigm (p. 18). They recognize that the transition to a new leadership model will not be easy for many managers and suggest that the role of the manager as a coach is the most appropriate approach. Sullivan (1991) discusses the role of library managers in this model and suggests responsibilities and strategies for the empowerment of staff.

The “SuperLeader” is another model of leadership that represents a shift toward empowerment of staff. At the heart of this model is the belief that effective staff performance results from optimizing staff potential. The SuperLeader facilitates “self-leadership” among the staff by helping them achieve their best performance. The SuperLeader encourages self-responsibility for performance and works to create an atmosphere of productivity (Mans & Sims, 1989, pp. 4-5).

The library manager of the future clearly needs to be one who focuses on people and their needs, accomplishes more work with fewer resources, adapts to an ever-changing set of demands, exercises innovation, and leads teams by empowering team members. The role is demanding and challenging. It requires a tolerance for ambiguity, an orientation toward change and belief in the value of change in organizations, and a willingness to be flexible but firm in one's convictions.

The role of the middle manager is changing, but some aspects of the traditional manager will remain. The number of levels of the hierarchy in research libraries may indeed be reduced, but some levels nonetheless will remain. They are necessary for the effective organization of work, for the leadership of those who perform that work, and for accountability for performance. The manager, however, is likely to continue to be “in the middle” between staff and senior administrators.

Role may be defined as the combination of functions performed and the behavioral style one uses in carrying out those functions. In his landmark study of managerial work, Mintzberg (1975) identified ten roles or “organized sets of behaviors identified with a position” within three general categories: (1) interpersonal roles of leader, liaison, and figurehead; (2) informational roles of monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson; and (3) decisional roles of entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator (pp. 54-58). Discussions with participants in the Management Skills

Institutes reveal that this model continues to fit as a description for their work. What has changed is the way in which the roles are carried out. The managerial or leadership style has shifted from one of telling staff what to do and how to do it (control) to one of creating the work environment in which staff are motivated to perform (empowerment).

The manager is now more of a gatekeeper or network facilitator of information rather than the source of information for staff. Instead of giving information directly to staff, the manager now ensures that staff know how and where to obtain the information they need. Staff are encouraged and expected to get the information they need when they need it without intervention from the supervisor.

The manager involves staff in performance planning by focusing on the setting of performance goals and objectives that inspire staff to achieve their highest potential. Evaluation remains a key component of the performance review process, but it is only a starting point for the next cycle of planning rather than the chief objective.

Rather than making most of the decisions within the work unit or department, the effective library manager now acts more as a facilitator for decision making in the department. The manager helps provide a structure for solving problems and assures that the appropriate staff are involved. The problems encountered by library staff are becoming increasingly complex and often require the involvement of several staff.

REQUIRED SKILLS AND ABILITIES

To be effective as a middle manager requires specific skills and abilities. The foundation for these skills and abilities is a philosophy that values staff at all levels for their competence and contribution and recognizes that each person continues to grow and develop. Among the assumptions included in this philosophy of management are:

- All staff members, regardless of the positions they hold, are valuable members of the organization and should be encouraged to perform to their potential and should be recognized for their particular contributions.
- Today's research library is an environment of continual change in which both problems and opportunities abound. Therefore, high performance is expected of everyone.
- Staff are committed to their work, to the larger purpose of the library, and to the goals of this profession.
- The best environment for effective performance in a time of considerable change is one in which learning and development are acknowledged to be both ongoing and important. Continuous

improvement is expected and understood to include identification of problems and learning from mistakes.

- The effective manager is one who has a high degree of self-awareness; understands the needs, strengths, weaknesses, and potential of each staff member; and attends to their own development as well as that of the staff.
- Individual job satisfaction occurs when staff perform work that matches their interests and abilities.

In the future, the middle manager in research libraries will need a broad set of skills and abilities. Few managers in today's research libraries have all these abilities and skills. Following the philosophy suggested by the Manager-as-Developer model, the following list might be viewed as a blueprint for the development of middle managers in research libraries:

1. *Foresight—i.e., the ability to envision the future and to think for the long term as well as the present.* Middle managers will have an important role in monitoring the external environment, identifying trends and changes that will affect the library, and making changes to internal systems to assure effective performance. The ability to anticipate changes in work and in staff needs will be important as will the ability to organize the work to allow flexibility so that changes can be made as needed.
2. *The ability to imagine new realities and share them with staff to develop a shared vision of the future.* Setting direction and helping staff to see their work and the problems they encounter as part of the larger library system is critical to the staff's ability to solve complex problems and to keep pace with change.
3. *A focus on quality service and continuous improvement.* This focus is the hallmark of Total Quality Management (TQM) programs. Some research libraries (e.g., Harvard College, Michigan, and the University of Minnesota) have begun to implement TQM. A number of others have started service improvement programs.
4. *An ability to project consequences of action and to assess the risks in decision making.*
5. *Actively seeking information from a variety of sources within the library, in the university community, and beyond.* Managers also will need to be skilled in assessing who needs to know what and selecting the most effective and efficient means to communicate that information.
6. *Establishing working relationships based on trust and mutual respect.* This requires honest and open communication, consistent

behavior, and a willingness to be influenced as well as to exercise influence.

7. *Persistence and perseverance* are two traits of Kanter's "change master."
8. *An understanding of organizational values and their relationship to the core mission of the library.*
9. *Communicating values to staff so that they can see their relationship to the work performed and develop their own commitment to those values.*
10. *Behaving in ways that are congruent with personal values and the espoused values of the library.* Authentic behavior is critically important to the development of working relationships that are based on trust.
11. *A willingness to challenge behavior that is inconsistent with organizational values or norms and performance expectations.* This requires a commitment to providing honest feedback to staff that is specific and delivered in a way that conveys support for the person but also provides a clear expectation that the person will act to correct the problem.
12. *An understanding of the political environment, both within the library and externally, and the ability to interact effectively with "key players."*
13. *A willingness to share power by creating meaningful opportunities for staff involvement in problem solving, decision making, and planning.* This involvement is critical to the development of staff commitment. It is also very important to library performance because the staff doing the work usually have the best information.
14. *Nurturing the development of others.* Helping staff to solve problems by engaging them in a process in which the manager is a helper, not the problem solver, thereby encouraging staff to be accountable and to assume the responsibility for solving their own problems.
15. *Taking an active interest in the career development of staff.* Managers must see the staff member as a component of the library organization as well as the incumbent of a particular position.
16. *Identifying the special abilities and potential in each person.* Accepting others for who they are, valuing differences, and promoting diversity among the staff are important components of this.
17. *Strong self-awareness and knowledge.* Managers are role models for staff. An accurate self concept and an understanding of strengths and weaknesses are important.

While individual managers must do all they can to develop necessary skills and abilities, senior administrators in today's research

libraries have an important responsibility to prepare current and future middle managers. In addition to providing support to attend management training programs, administrators should take an active role in helping the managers to learn from their day-to-day experience in the library. Frequent discussions should be held about situations and problems encountered by the manager in which the administrator not only listens but also guides the manager to identify what he or she has learned from each critical experience. When these discussions assume the character of a coaching session, as described by Evered and Selman (1989), the administrator is attending to the developmental needs of the manager in the way the manager is expected to do so for staff.

Administrators, other than the one to whom the manager reports, can assist in this developmental process by spending time with the manager, sharing experiences, discussing problems, exploring some of the broader issues in the library or the profession, and identifying opportunities for growth and development. Some of these relationships may develop to a point where the administrator is a mentor to the manager, thereby further enriching the learning experience for the manager in the library.

Managers need a variety of experiences in their libraries, in their universities, in librarianship, and in higher education. Cross-departmental projects, staff exchange programs, internships in other university departments, fellowships like those offered by the American Council on Education and the Council on Library Resources' Academic Library Management Intern Program are some examples. Opportunities to work in different environments, to work outside of one's area of expertise, to associate with different colleagues, and to stretch beyond one's capabilities offer a significant chance for the middle manager to grow and develop.

The research library community would benefit from the creation of an institute for leadership education to prepare current and future managers. The curriculum should be designed around the philosophy and list of skills and abilities described earlier. Creation of such an institute would offer an opportunity for collaboration among research library administrators, library educators, and specialists in leadership development and management training.

The future for the middle manager in research libraries is one of uncertainty, change, and ambiguity. The demands and often conflicting expectations of staff and administrators will continue. The restructuring now underway in some research libraries may mean that some libraries will have fewer middle management positions in the future than they have today, but it will not result in the disappearance of this level. The skills and abilities required to be

effective with the current and future work force and to manage in what promises to be an ever-changing and increasingly complex work environment indicate that the position will be as demanding as ever. For those who enjoy the challenge of working with people, solving new problems, facilitating change, and influencing the future, the role offers opportunity, excitement, and satisfaction. The middle manager in the research library of the future will play a critical role in assuring effective performance by doing precisely what the term suggests: managing in the middle by integrating the needs, interests, and goals of senior management with those of staff.

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