

## Leadership 101

### Column 1: What is leadership and why does it matter?

Laurie Scott

*This is the first in a series of columns addressing the topic of leadership. They are based on the Canadian Health Libraries Association / Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada (CHLA / ABSC) accredited course, "Discover the Leader in You: Developing and Realizing your Leadership Potential", developed and delivered by D. Phelan, L. Scott, and W. Glover. The columns will explore what leadership is, what qualities leaders possess, how to assess your own leadership skills, how leadership differs from management, ideas for developing your own leadership potential and how to take on leadership roles in your workplace and profession. Interested readers are encouraged to join the CHLA / ABSC Leadership Interest Group. Contact the author or consult the CHLA / ABSC Web site (<http://www.chla-absc.ca>) for more information.*

Most of us, if asked to name a great leader, would have little difficulty in complying. Historical figures such as Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Tommy Douglas often come to mind. Some people might also name present-day activists or philanthropists such as Bill Gates, Bono, or Oprah. In our own lives, we know people we consider to be leaders in their own realms, such as a great boss, an outstanding student, an inspiring spiritual guide, or an admired professional colleague. We recognize leadership almost instinctually, but there is value in delving more deeply into the qualities and behaviours of a leader. What makes a great leader, and why is it important that we know?

There are many definitions of "leader", ranging from the simplest—"the person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country"<sup>1</sup>—to the very complex. One excellent definition appeared in a brief article by David S. Mash in *C&RL News* in 2007:

It is my conviction that a leader is anyone regardless of position or power whose moral bearings, relational skills, breadth of awareness, and decision-making practices are admired and emulated by others. Someone who occupies a position of leadership or power, but who lacks these qualities, may have subordinates who comply and peers who cower, but they will not be able to cultivate a sustained commitment to the course they set.<sup>2</sup>

The reason this definition was highlighted is that it makes clear that one does not need to have power, in the conventional sense of the word, to be a leader. Everyone, regardless of rank, can have the necessary qualities and take on a leadership role. Consider the many people throughout history who held no real *political* power, yet held moral sway and successfully led a population or cause: Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Terry Fox, and countless others.

The literature of management and business is filled with books and articles (scholarly and lay) devoted to the analysis of leadership. The ability of CEOs, senior and middle managers, and front-line staff to effectively lead people and projects is considered crucial to the success of both for-profit corporations and not-for-profit ventures.

There is considerable literature in the nursing profession as well, with over 3000 CINAHL hits using the subject heading Nursing Leaders, and over 2000 hits when that subject heading is focussed. Meanwhile, a title search in Library Literature and Information Science Full Text yields a number of recent articles dealing with leadership, yet there is no subject heading for it. Instead, suggested headings for the concept revolve around "administration"—a far cry from the concept of leadership (as we will see in a future column). Is librarianship late coming to the leadership party?

It is important for librarians to think about leadership and what it means to us as a profession. How should we define librarian leadership? In the business literature, a number of characteristics are cited, among them

- Vision
- Passion
- Integrity
- Honesty
- Curiosity
- Daring
- Decisiveness
- Flexibility

Another important characteristic is generosity—sharing time, knowledge, and experience. True leaders are coaches, mentors, and teachers. They see it as their responsibility to

<sup>1</sup>C. Soanes, A. Stevenson, editors. *The Oxford Dictionary of English*. Revised ed. Oxford University Press; 2005.

<sup>2</sup>D.S. Mash. Reflections of a former CIO: Leadership lessons learned. *C&RL News*. 2007;68(9):592-3.

nurture the development of their colleagues at all stages of their careers. While we tend to think of this role as being from “elder to youth” or “superior to subordinate”, in fact librarians who are at an early stage in their careers can mentor more experienced colleagues, and peers can mentor peers. New knowledge needs to be shared equally with knowledge gained through years of experience, and every person’s experience is unique.

It also needs to be said that leaders are not afraid to surround themselves with people of equal or greater ability. Individuals who are in a position of authority but are threatened by smarter or more capable people are not leaders. Leaders encourage excellence in the contributions of all participants in a venture for the good of the venture.

The qualities listed above are ones we all want our leaders to have. They go a long way to distinguish what we really mean by leadership versus the simplistic dictionary definition which would include every despot who ever lived. But the list may also give one pause. Can anyone really have all those characteristics? Aren’t leaders truly extraordinary people? Many leaders actually are extraordinary, but to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln (badly), some people are leaders all of the time, but many people can be leaders some of the time. Librarians can take on leadership roles in ways both

big and small. Our workplaces, whether we work in a hospital, a health unit, or a university, provide many leadership opportunities if we know where to look. Likewise, our profession offers a multitude of possibilities to take on a leadership role.

Librarian leaders are the people who will help to define the future of the profession and ensure smooth transitions and succession planning. Taking on leadership roles is enriching to our professional and personal lives and helps us to reach our potential. Take some time to reflect on the qualities listed above and to think about people you have known in your own life who possess these qualities—people you might consider to be a leader. Are there other characteristics would you ascribe to them? What made them a leader in your eyes? You might also reflect on how we can develop the future leaders of our profession. Who knows? One of them might be you!

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