

A Conversation about Leadership

Linda Crook and Beth Blakesley

As part of LLAMA's focus on new leaders in our profession, the editorial team at LL&M began a new feature in the last issue entitled "New Perspectives in Leadership." Since Associate Editor Beth Blakesley works with (and lives next door to) Linda Crook, the current President of the New Members Round Table and 2008 Emerging Leader, Beth thought it would be easy to contact her for an interview with LL&M. Linda thought it would be even better for them to interview each other, to have a conversation about leadership.

Q: What makes someone a leader?

Beth: I think leaders have a big picture view, can see beyond their own position or their own preferences. Leaders put the organization before themselves. Leaders can influence people without being a bully. Leaders can influence positive changes without micromanaging. Leaders know when to follow.

Linda: Vision and confidence.

Q: What makes someone a good leader?

Beth: Patience. Emotional intelligence.

Linda: The ability to inspire others to strive for the same vision. To quote the Tao Te Ching, "When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

Q: How do you know if you're a leader? How do you know if you're a good leader?

Beth: I think leaders are often slow to see themselves as leaders, which actually makes them good leaders. People who think they're awesome at leading often really aren't. You might be a leader if people listen to you, people ask you for your opinion, and people suggest things you said on previous occasions when they are asked for ideas or input. If people keep asking you to chair committees and task forces, they probably see you as a leader or think you have "management potential."

Linda: I was once in a session for new librarians, and the speaker asked if we considered ourselves leaders. To my amazement, everyone said "no." The first step in being a leader is saying "YES" to that question! That's my favorite piece of advice – say "yes." Take being an artist, for example. Art can be your hobby, and you can be good at it, but until you say, "yes, I'm

an artist,” you aren’t one. I said “yes” to being a leader. The speaker asked how I knew. I knew I was a leader because I believed it, because I told myself “yes, you are,” and because I was willing to tell others, “yes, I am.”

I wish I knew if I was a good leader, but it gets all mixed up in other things like being organized and understanding parliamentary procedure and proper time management. I think I could be a very good leader if I had more time and an entourage to help keep me on track. In the meantime, I do my best to have a vision, to share that vision, and to keep my eyes open to other visions.

Beth: That’s an important thing, that flexibility, the willingness to adjust one’s vision. That sets excellent leaders apart.

Q: If you’re not a leader, can you become one? How?

Beth: I think you’re a leader or you’re not. You can certainly become a manager. Management skills can be learned, improved, expanded. Leadership is more intrinsic to the person. I think you’re either the kind who does it or you’re not.

Linda: Growing up, I knew for certain I would never be a leader, just like I knew I’d never be a reference librarian. When I first started in libraries, as a student assistant in a circulation department, I was too shy to even answer the phone. I had to push myself to discover that I could answer the phone, I could answer reference questions, I could be a leader. It was a decision—or a series of decisions—I had to make about who I was and who I wanted to be. But I agree with Beth – the potential has to be there.

Beth: I was one of those people who grumbled about the required management course in library school, since I knew without a doubt that I would never be a manager. But I went to library school to become a cataloger and also swore I would never work at reference or teach a class. I had been pushed into leadership roles all throughout elementary and high school, and had spent my college years cultivating a certain detachment. What I ended up learning about myself was that I couldn’t sustain that detachment -- I couldn’t deny that I cared about what I was doing, I couldn’t have done it otherwise, and with that came the desire to make things the best they could be, to make things work. Acting upon that is a lot of what leadership is.

Q: How do you nurture leadership skills?

Linda: Sometimes you can start leading just by showing up and being willing to work. Helping to move a meeting along, even if you’re not officially the chair; making sure your team or committee makes deadlines; there are lots of ways to discover and nurture your own leadership potential.

Beth: As a leader and a manager, I look for opportunities to get people involved, to give people opportunities help shape the daily reality and the future. That was what really appealed to me about our move toward the team structure in different areas at the WSU Libraries – I saw it as a way to create opportunities for people to take on an issue or an area, to provide leadership for something new or for a new way of delivering a service, and to let them focus on that. Another part of that structure involved offering everyone opportunities to shift into areas of competence and preference but that also meant that the supervision and management needed to be flatter. In our case, the team leaders can provide leadership for a function like reference or assessment without supervising 25% of one person and 50% of another and 10% of yet a third person.

Linda: As a team leader in the WSU Libraries, I've really appreciated the opportunity to concentrate on my leadership skills, without worrying about my management skills at the same time. It's the kind of opportunity librarians have been wanting for years – to advance our careers without being a manager.

Q: Do you ever wish you weren't a leader? Is it possible to stop being a leader?

Beth: Yes. No. To expand: yes, of course. Somedays it's hard to do all the things that need doing, to be the strong one, so to speak. Somedays it's hard not to let the management issues get in the way. Can someone stop? That's tough. I think someone can stop being a manager. I think someone can mask or ignore one's leadership tendencies, but actually stop? I don't think it's possible. It would be like deciding to not have common sense anymore.

Linda: Sometimes I get overwhelmed, or tired, but I never really want to stop being a leader. It's just sometimes hard to be the best leader I can be. To stop being a leader—or at least stop being a good one—you have to stop caring. I hope that never happens to me.

Q: How (much) should a leader delegate? What do you do if you delegate a task and it's a disaster?

Beth: Depends on lots of things. You need to delegate what's appropriate and reasonable. Don't have the front desk receptionist tell an assistant manager she's losing her job. Don't ask the custodian to reprogram the Unix server or tell the IT guy to clean up a carpet stain. Extreme examples, but my point is that you just can't delegate some things, and some things are just not in concert with people's skill sets. If something goes wrong, my advice is to pick up the pieces. The patron comes first, make sure that the situation is fixed for the customer, then deal with the internal issues. Assess what happened. Did you delegate something that you shouldn't have? Were the instructions unclear? Did you not follow up with the person? Did the person make an honest mistake? Did the person misjudge his or her abilities when taking on the task? Was the person uncomfortable or afraid to ask you for help? Have an honest, frank conversation with the person. Let it be a learning experience for everyone involved.

Linda: This is something I'm still learning every day, all the time. Not just determining how much to delegate, but determining how much has been delegated to me, as a team leader. Is this a decision I can make, or do I need to work on this with the team's steering committee? In a previous job I once delegated a task to someone who didn't follow through, at a time when my performance was being evaluated. It was the right kind of task to delegate, but it was the wrong time.

In a class on delegating, we were taught, "if you can delegate, do." When you do delegate, you have to be ready to facilitate the success of the person doing the work. You have to ignore that little voice saying, "If you want something done right, you'd better do it yourself." Know what your expectations are, share those expectations, and be prepared for your worker to find a completely different approach! It can be like living with someone. If you say, "You're not loading the dishwasher correctly," you're going to end up doing it yourself every time. You have to say, "Thank you, I really appreciate that," and then look at the quality of the results. Maybe their way works, too. But, like Beth says, it depends on lots of things.

Beth: Yes, you have to look at the end result, not the method or process. Did the job get done correctly and in a timely fashion? Did it get done exactly the way you would have done it? The first question is the only one that matters.

Conclusion

How would you answer these questions? Visit the LLAMA/NMRT New Leaders Discussion Group on Connect, <http://connect.ala.org/node/150557>, to keep the discussion going! And don't forget to join us at ALA Midwinter for the next New Leaders Discussion Forum, Sunday January 22, 10:30 am-12:00, for a discussion about how professional organization leadership can enhance your day-to-day job.

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