Engaging Leadership

Understanding 'Other Duties as Assigned'

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Several months ago, the library was asked to house a large three dimensional representation of the campus while the Provost's Office was undergoing renovation. It was one of those requests that one cannot gracefully refuse, so we found a space for the multi-tabletop display and initiated conversation about the relocation process. Discovering at the last minute that the Provost's assistant's idea of "delivery" was to make many trips across campus delivering it piece by piece in an office mail push cart, I took off my "Associate-Dean-in-the-office" shoes and put on my "library van driver and moving supervisor" shoes and grabbed my Facilities Manager to help go get the display. As I was helping unload it at the library, one of my colleagues did a double take and came over with a grin to suggest quizzically "other duties as assigned?" We shared a laugh but later the incident made me stop and ponder how that particular phrase plays such a significant role in defining leadership. This column explores some different perspectives on how the willingness to take on 'Other Duties as Assigned' can both help and hurt one as a leader.

Minimum Qualification for Leadership

Most formal position descriptions have somewhere between 2% and 10% assigned to a category generally defined as 'Other duties as assigned' or a similar broadly written phrase. Often this is intended to account for the occasional operational need that comes up or to address time spent on tasks like compliance-based, online training classes, or the one-off task or one-time project. As one takes on titled leadership roles, one will see a significant increase in how much time is spent on activities that fall into the 'Other Duties as Assigned.' This increase in the unpredictable is often accompanied by more vaguely written position responsibilities.

One phrase you seldom hear a successful leader say is "I'm not responsible for that because it is not in my job description." Conversely, it can be one of the most frustrating phrases to hear from staff members who are not motivated by a desire for leadership opportunities. A willingness to step outside their core position descriptions is typical for both titled leaders and those who tend to evolve into grass roots leaders. There are several reasons for this trend. One is that most leaders understand the interconnected nature of library operations and failure to follow through in one area can potentially impact other areas negatively. Therefore, the other duty is often taken on for the overall good or success of the organization. Another reason to take on 'Other Duties' is that enlightened leaders understand that as much as they try to plan for every eventuality, they live in a world that offers one surprise after another and they cannot codify every scenario that might occur. Additionally, even when plans are made they are meant to provide frameworks that still call for situational judgment skills because the details will be

different. Leaders also realize that most libraries are not so robustly staffed that one has a dedicated individual just waiting in the wings to do occasional things. Finally, engaged leaders realize that individuals do not grow by performing the same task over and over. Individuals, including the leaders themselves, develop leadership skills by stepping outside of their routine, taking on new challenges, and learning from them.

That said, organizations often have a hierarchical or functional structure for a reason. Taking on responsibilities or duties that are actually covered under the scope of a different individual's assigned responsibilities can have a negative impact on both the organizational culture and the individual. Similarly, always being the one to take on various additional responsibilities can lead to perceptual issues that can undermine one's future effectiveness. So one needs to keep in mind that there are contextual issues to 'Other Duties as Assigned' that should be considered, and just being a leader or willing to take it on does not make one the best person to do so. On some occasions, invoking the phrase about a task not being in one's area of responsibility may actually be the correct response, even for titled leaders. This is discussed in more detail later in the article.

While all positions offer opportunities to engage in professional development activities through 'Other Duties as Assigned,' they are more likely to be found among professional ranks than entry level front line staff or student and volunteer employees. Part of this is that libraries must have a basis for defining consistency in service and guidelines for establishing an equitable environment. This does not mean exceptions do not exist, but they should be rare, occasional, and justified by the facts of the situation. The exception should not become the rule, which can occur if everyone is making on-the-fly, situational adjustments to policy as a one-off transaction. And often, 'Other Duties as Assigned' plays into the world of exceptions or troubleshooting. I once had a colleague who was fairly new to management complain that she never saw routine problems that were easy to fix, that she only got all the messy, weird cases. She had not realized this is typical of being a leader and a change she should have expected to encounter because her well-trained staff members were quite able to handle the straightforward transactions.

In addition to being 'exceptions,' frequently 'Other Duties as Assigned' land in a leader's lap because the situation requires engaging across the library and involving leaders or individuals in other operational units. It is often easier for an individual in a titled leadership role to step into this sort of scenario. The same goes for projects initiated at an institutional level where different colleges or departments are involved. If one is assigned to an institution level task force on targeted recruiting, then one ought to have some background of knowing what is already going on and what the various issues are, in order to be an effective contributor on the task force. In all likelihood this may need to be a leader or senior employee from an outreach or library instruction unit, not a new or front-line librarian. It might even require working with offices outside of the library at a level where one can speak for the library and make institutional commitments of financial or personnel resources, which definitely specifies engagement at the titled leadership level.

Good Reasons for "Other Duties"

There are many situations and scenarios where a leader being comfortable taking on 'Other Duties as Assigned,' whether as a formal top down assignment or through self-initiated actions, will have a positive impact on the organization. A leader who is comfortable dealing with the messy situations passed up to them will make staff members feel supported and confident in their own abilities, and the staff will know there are options available for the overwhelming situations. Similarly, actively pitching in during a crisis, rather than directing from behind a desk, sends a clear message of teamwork, investment and valuing contributions. Some examples of this might be an Associate Dean working night/weekend shifts as part of a reference desk rotation when there is a shortage due to a regular staff member being out for an extended period. Another example might be an administrator who helps search for an urgently requested volume that was boxed up somewhere in a multi-pallet remote storage shipment. All of these send a clear message of commitment to service and modeling behaviors. It also sends a symbolic message of being together with front-line staff as part of the team and willing to do the same responsibilities asked of them, particularly when it comes to less desirable responsibilities that are shared. However, these contributions must be realistic and appropriate to the situation and not staged photo-ops or token contributions. Staged scenarios can backfire and undermine the team effect by sending a message that is perceived as patronizing. It is also important to make sure one is not creating work for others because they have been removed from the front lines and no longer are current on processes or resources. In this latter case, other measures to acknowledge recognition and appreciation may be more appropriate.

One advantage of stepping in and helping with a front line role is that it will give one an opportunity to see operations with a fresh perspective that those embedded in the process on a daily basis may have lost. This does not mean one should immediately start making changes. Instead one should note areas of observation or concern and later bring them to the attention of the unit leader in an explorative way. There may be legitimate reasons for the practice or one may be seeing something that was an exception rather than the norm. If one gets too heavy handed in directing change based on a snapshot perspective, one can become the leader the unit does not want to help which is reflective of other problematic organization culture issues.

Another area where it helps to see leaders responding in the 'Other Duties as Assigned' scenario is that it models through example behaviors that are desirable in growing leaders. It gives visibility to those who might think they want to be leaders on what sort of expectations they would encounter. I have had individuals approach me to say "you shouldn't have to do that" or "you wouldn't catch me doing this" as if it was a demeaning sort of activity or beneath their rank or status. This is something of a red flag that the individuals may not be as ready for leadership responsibilities as they think they are.

Finally, when a leader shows flexibility in taking on a challenging project outside of their normal responsibilities and succeeds at it, this encourages others to be more flexible in their thinking. Every time someone accomplishes a project that someone else said "could not be done," it opens the door for others to believe in the positive outcomes of change and demonstrates the value of not being limited by bureaucratic structure. Similarly, it again demonstrates that the

leader is modeling the characteristics of flexibility, agility, and openness to change that one wants to see within all layers of the organization.

Where It Can Get You into Trouble

Even though there are often organizational advantages and growth opportunities embedded within leaders demonstrating or encouraging 'Other Duties as Assigned,' one still has to be careful. As has been alluded to earlier, 'Other Duties as Assigned' can create problems for the individual and organization when taken to extremes. It can also be problematic if the duties actually introduce issues of non-compliance with institutional rules or regulations.

One specific example of the latter is when one works in a unionized environment. There can be challenges or grievances filed against leaders when it is perceived that individuals have been asked to work outside of their position descriptions. In these cases, paying attention to the percentage that is actually assigned to the "Other Duties" category is extremely important. In a related way doing activities associated with a union-specific title, when one does not hold that title, can also be cause for a complaint or grievance. I recall some advice I had received several years ago when I worked as an engineer in the aerospace industry for a company in which the machinists were unionized but the engineers were not. Engineers were told that they could go down on the manufacturing floor but had to be careful not to pick up a tool -- even if it was lying on the floor -- because touching an actual tool could be construed as a union violation. So if one is in an equivalent library environment, one may be limited in what one can actually do to pitch in and help. This is important even in right-to-work environments where particular titles have generic descriptions describing the scope of responsibilities. In academic environments, there may be rules on how research activities are supported in order to prevent a single faculty member from monopolizing a member of the shared departmental support staff for his or her own projects.

Similar to the union concern is the situation where the organization is not formally unionized but there are explicitly defined responsibilities and pay scales associated with particular titles. This becomes problematic when a particular employee repeatedly becomes the "go to" person for the 'Other Duties as Assigned' because of individual skill and enthusiasm but it becomes a sufficiently significant portion of the employee's time and the individual is no longer classified in the appropriate title or being compensated accordingly. In this case, one risks a formal complaint of inequity or discrimination, not on the part of the employee, but more likely made by a peer or co-worker. Often the co-worker is motivated by an emotion-laden response to perceived or observed inequities. The complainant may be jealous or resentful and believe that the other individual is getting preferential treatment by getting to do "fun" extra stuff that the complainant does not get to do. The complainant may feel that routine duties have been added to his or her workload in order to free the other employee for these other duties. Alternately, the complainant may believe that the other employee is being mistreated by being required to do these additional responsibilities and is outraged or protective on behalf of the other employee. Either way, an official review may be triggered, and in the event that the decision reached is to reclassify the employee, one may be looking at having to find funds to pay for the higher salary, and maybe even with a retroactive pay option depending on institutional policy. This scenario is

stickiest when one is dealing with a situation where one is trying to develop the individual for future major promotion opportunities but the institutional bureaucracy does not allow a smaller incremental recognition for these extra projects. Again, one must be careful to keep to the assigned position and this is why most institutions will have a cap on what percentage of responsibilities can be associated with 'Other Duties as Assigned.' If one is engaging in growth or succession planning, it may be wise to consult with Human Resources for advice on the best way to address the organizational need beforehand. There may be options for modifying the position responsibilities on a temporary or interim basis that one can implement to head off problems.

Professional Risks from Repeated Engagement

Several of the other hazards related to taking on too many 'Other Duties as Assigned' are more individual in nature and relate less to the classified staff model or organizational structure but come about when leaders lose perspective and engage in a way that can damage their professional reputations. The context can vary but some frequent themes to watch out for include perceptions of favoritism, grand-standing or glory-seeking, territorialism, insensitivity to others, and loss of professional focus. Whether these perceptions are legitimate or not, they can increase interpersonal conflict and get in the way of an individual's continued growth and success.

It is a tendency of all organizations to continue doing something when they discover it works well. So once an individual has demonstrated a talent to succeed in 'Other Duties as Assigned,' it is common for leaders to come calling again. But the rationale for this may not be seen by others outside of the leadership, decision-making team. To an outside perspective, one is getting a disproportionate share of opportunities for developing which can lead to a perception of favoritism. Part of this can be ameliorated by self-reflection and adjustment of one's own public response to the assignment. Is one announcing the responsibility in a way that mirrors receiving an award or accolade or setting oneself as more favored than peers? Is there an edge of pride or even gloating in one's tone? Or is one using a balanced response that acknowledges it is a big responsibility to carry even as it does reflect a level of confidence on the part of administrators? The other side of the concern is that if you are always the "go to" individual, then others who might want to grow are denied the opportunity to grow or develop their own flexibility or project management skills.

One aspect of engaging in 'Other Duties as Assigned' is that often these 'Other Duties' may be high-profile or experimental initiatives where one has the opportunity to be very visible in the success or failure of the project. Under this type of spotlight, it can be difficult to find middle ground or quiet engagement as there is often broad organizational interest or investment in the outcome. Even as one may have been selected to lead the initiative, the effort itself is likely to impact other areas of the organization due to the interconnected nature of how libraries function. This interconnectivity may involve direct impact accompanied by immediate involvement or an indirect, secondary impact further down the line after implementation. Sensitivity to this interest, potential impact, and accompanying concerns is demonstrated by giving open updates and engaging with potentially impacted stakeholders. Unfortunately, this can be frustrating when

their change anxiety results in free-form suggestions having little or no relevancy or value and seem to delay moving forward. A natural tendency in this sort of situation is just to take full control of the project and keep it close by doling out updates on a highly limited need-to-know perspective. This approach is problematic because even as it may speed up the project, it also contributes to the perception that the individual is doing it more for personal gain than as an organizational good or that there is something threatening that to needs to be kept hidden. Needless to say this provides fertile ground for mistrust, suspicion, and paranoia to flourish and may undermine both the project and the leader who has undertaken it.

In a related fashion, few projects or initiatives that occur in libraries are truly isolated from all other operational areas. How one engages in bringing these other areas and individuals into the initiative or project can go a long way to building organizational good will and engagement. Just because one has been assigned the administrative leadership of the initiative does not give one carte blanche to intrude into other unit operations without engaging with unit leaders and considering the workload disruptions your project may create. Similarly, one may think one knows who would be a perfect representative on an interdepartmental team, but in truth the individual may have other factors related to performance or workload that would inhibit the ability to be an effective contributor. It is in one's long term best interests to follow the recommendations of the other line manager. This is extremely important as one may be part of the smaller titled management or administrator community because unless one is planning to find another job somewhere else as soon as the project is done, keeping a positive professional relationship with one's immediate peer community is extremely important. Even a manager who is not territorial or defensive of perceived intrusions is still responsible for the units' continued operation and needs to have a say in resource allocations and workload impacts. For managers who do feel a bit possessive or protective of their units, the reaction to your borrowing staff members or telling them how they have to change can actually contribute to a hostile environment that does long term damage to the future working relationship. Similarly, one should be careful invoking the Director's delegated authority as that gets back to the issue of perceived favoritism or privilege and undermine the future ability to function as a team. And I can guarantee that at some point in the future, you will be in a position to need something from these other managers and if one is not careful one may get the desired outcome this time but irrevocably damage future opportunities for successful collaboration.

As a consequence of demonstrating success in dealing with initiatives that often require extensive problem solving skills and working across the organization, a leader can become the "go to" individual for anyone seeking a solution to something that is frustrating them. However, one should engage cautiously in taking on other's causes. While there is an initial desire to want to help move the organization forward, unless the leader's area is directly impacted by the issue, he or she should refer the individual to other solutions that engage the process owners or stakeholders. Otherwise, the leader can be perceived as always pursuing 'Other Duties' regardless of the 'as Assigned' aspect and trigger some of the territorial issues previously mentioned. This is the situation where the correct answer truly is the leader's variation of "not in my job description." That said, a leader may be able to engage in a neutral way if a referral to the responsible manager is not well received. In this model, one can offer to serve in the

facilitator or mediator role of simply bringing stakeholders together and putting the perceived problem on the table to see if anyone else wants to engage in developing a solution.

A final caution about being the regular "go to" person for "Other Duties as Assigned" relates to investing in your own professional development. In time, repeated project jumping or troubleshooting can be mentally exhausting and get in the way of actual career building in a strategic and focused way. It is important not to lose sight of primary responsibilities associated with your position title. Getting behind on core organizational needs while supporting short term initiatives can only be used as an excuse for so long. In some cases, you might need to bring to an administrator's attention how much time you have been putting toward the 'Other Duties' front as he or she may have lost sight of how many 'Other Duties' have actually been assigned your direction. In this way, it may actually be in your best interest to diplomatically decline the opportunity and make a case for another to take it on.

In Conclusion

A certain degree of flexibility to address opportunities and initiatives is built into most position responsibilities, but when one begins to step up as a leader or moves into a titled managerial or administrative position, the percentage of time one devotes to 'Other Duties as Assigned' significantly increases. In fact, it could be suggested that the willingness to enthusiastically engage special initiatives outside one's immediate area or working across an organization is an indicator of leadership effectiveness. There are many advantages to taking on these types of project-oriented or troubleshooting roles in terms of both personal and organization development. But as with many things in life, some can be too much of a good thing and can even actually be damaging. It is important not to let 'Other Duties' consume one to the degree that one buys into the concept that one is the **only** person who can take on challenges or lead change, because that sets the stage for a perceptual emotion-laden backlash from peer leaders. Additionally, it encourages one to lose sight of and neglect one's core responsibilities and ultimately be less successful and less effective for the organization.

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