Appalachian
STATE UNIVERSITY.
BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA

Losing Our Libraries: Misguided Leadership

By: **Dr. Alex McAllister, Allan Scherlen**, and Bobby Hollandsworth

Abstract

Previous studies have indicated that academic libraries can be stressful places to work, with one of the main reasons being poor leadership. Library administrators continue to fit a common mold transitioning academic libraries into more business-like models focusing strongly on assessment, goals, and data. Throw these values in with the need to pursue innovation, and academic libraries are becoming more chaotic places to work, especially for those who value qualitative information and research. Over the years, libraries have added innovative spaces at the expense of collections, but many fear this insatiable appetite to seem innovative neglects the academic. In other words, there is a shifting of resources and attention away from those academic needs that have made the library a necessary place for the success of students, faculty, and researchers. The question many library leaders ignore is, "What do faculty and students still need from the library?" In a follow-up to Scherlen and McAllister's Voices Versus Visions: A Commentary on Academic Library Collections and New Directions, the authors expanded on the idea that library leaders can create stressful, even toxic, work environments based on business-like models at the expense of academia and in their pursuit to be at the forefront of technology. As libraries continue to deal with high administrative turnover, the audience will be asked to engage in a discussion. A few possible questions include: What impacts do these changes have on your library? Are the changes worth the price? What can we do to preserve the core library mission of research?

Losing Our Libraries:
Misguided Leadership

ALEX MCALLISTER, ALLAN SCHERLEN, AND BOBBY
HOLLANDSWORTH

Dr. Alex McAllister and **Allan Scherlen** of Appalachian State
University and Bobby Hollandsworth of Clemson University,
Charleston Conference, November 17, 2022

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Turnover in Libraries

Why do we have such administrative turnover in academic

libraries? And why is there so much discontent with library leadership? The authors have been considering this discontent for a few years now, exemplified by Scherlen and McAllister's "Voices Versus Visions: A Commentary on Academic Library Collections and New Directions," published in Collection Management in 2019. The authors discovered that many people who are attracted to administrative positions such as Dean of the Libraries are, unfortunately, unfamiliar with the various approaches to leadership and are overemphatic about strategic plans, goals, reports, data, and what university leadership are pushing administrators to be doing. Many nonadministrative employees are affected by this approach, and faculty and staff look to shared governance, discussion, and transparency of leadership as the healthy part of their institution's culture.

At the presentation, McAllister began by noting the high turnover of librarians, highlighting the statistics on this phenomenon, and the main reasons for librarians to seek new positions. Two main reasons included "unpleasant working environments, unhappiness with administration" (Fyn et al., p. 141). Fyn et al. found that the biggest contributing factor to turnover was dissatisfaction with library administration and direct supervisors. McAllister noted that conferences such as Charleston Conference are an excellent venue, though infrequently utilized, for this kind of discussion regarding toxic leadership over the morale and culture of the library. The presenters provided several discussion questions about leadership for attendees to consider throughout the session (see Appendix A).

The impact on faculty well-being can be disheartening to many librarians who try hard to serve the institution and expect the same from their leadership. This is especially disheartening when we

consider how disconnected leadership is from fostering direct mentoring (Fyn et al., 2019). Some of their concerns may also be overlooked in the hiring process, with cursory questions about leadership asked and too little time devoted to examining candidate commitment to good leadership skills. Culture and morale were also areas where 49.45% of librarians had discontentment. About 50% were dissatisfied with library administration (Fyn et al., 2019).

TABLE 1
Academic Librarians' Dissatisfaction with Work Environment

Response	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N-Size
I was not satisfied with my direct supervisor(s)	43.43%	20.44%	14.23%	21.90%	274
I was not satisfied with library administration	50.00%	22.06%	9.93%	18.01%	272
I was not satisfied with my co-workers	12.92%	31.37%	24.72%	31.00%	271
I was not satisfied with librarian status or rank (e.g., faculty/non-faculty status, tenure track)	19.19%	19.56%	20.66%	40.59%	271
I was not satisfied with the level of inclusivity	15.56%	28.52%	30.74%	25.19%	270
I was not satisfied with the culture of the library	36.03%	33.82%	17.56%	12.50%	272
I was not satisfied with the morale in the library	49.45%	30.04%	8.79%	11.72%	273
I was not satisfied with the library's reputation	9.23%	15.50%	34.695	40.59%	271
I was not satisfied with the university's local or national reputation	8.82%	18.75%	26.47%	45.96%	272

Fyn et al., 2019, p. 141.

Toxic Leadership

Far too often we encounter what is described in the literature as "toxic leadership" (Ortega, 2017). This is leadership that works against its own goal of success by suppressing the creative flow of faculty, ignoring their input, or crushing it before it can be properly utilized. Ortega offers a further definition of toxic leadership:

Toxic leadership requires egregious actions taken against some or all of the members, even among peers, of the organization a leader heads; actions that cause considerable and long-lasting damage to individuals and the organization that often continue even after the perpetrator has left the organization. (2017, p. 6)

Ortega shared numerous stories about toxic leadership and how it negatively affected librarians. These stories, as well as the comments from this conference presentation, highlight a current problem that pervades all areas of academic librarianship. One way

to understand how toxic leadership grows in an organization is to analyze how these leaders implement their initiatives through certain followers.

In Praise of Followers

Hollandsworth led a discussion of Kelley's scheme of effective followers in an institution (1988). Contrary to what toxic leaders may employ, they see uncritical thinking and sheep-like followers as preferable to active, effective followers. They may sort out their

faculty to find the appropriate followers who may not draw attention to a controversial topic of weeding books, painting walls a distinctive color, or hanging art. Those grouped with the less desirable contrarians will be further isolated and pushed into discontentment. Figure 1 distributes the type of followers that can be confusing to leadership, which seeks to move the library into a top-down model.
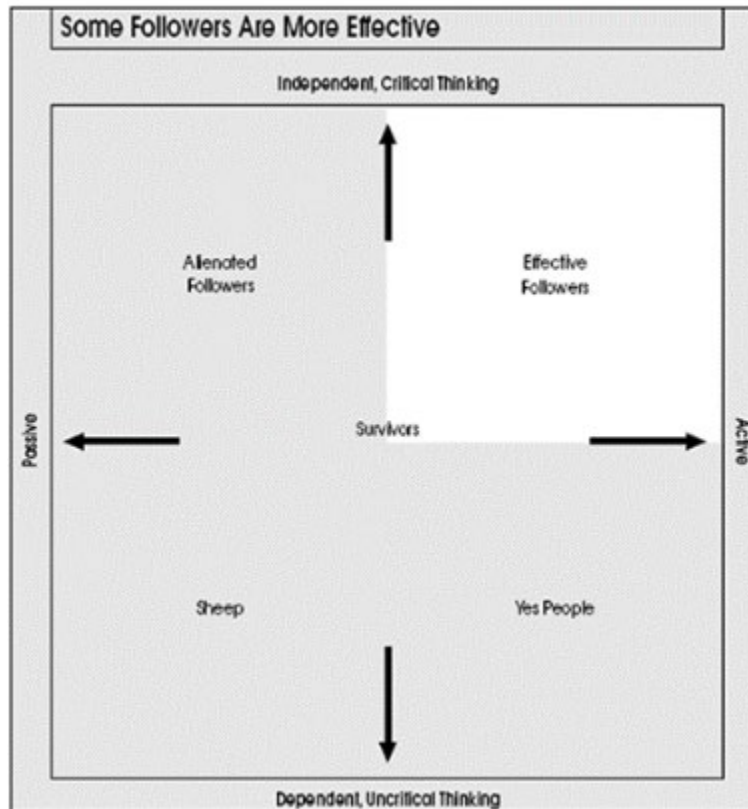

Figure 1: Types of Followers (Kelley, 1988)

What Are Some of the Problems?

McAllister asked the audience to express their own concerns about leadership at their own libraries using an online Padlet: https://padlet.com/mcallisterad/xyi9qwe5ocics8u5. The use of anonymous input, utilizing an online mechanism, fulfilled the wish to gain input. It was interesting, however, to see the abundant discontentment expressed by attendees about leadership (see

Appendix B). Below are some of the issues librarians cited in the leadership at their libraries:

• Conflict averse

• Lack of communication, vision

• Cannot empathize with/understand issues of front-line poorly paid library workers

• Ineffective, terrible at conflict resolution

• Lack of consultative process

• Unclear decision-making

• Favoritism

• Focusing on shiny projects at the expense of resource and core services

• Lack of transparency, trying to control by withholding information

• Hesitancy to push back on university leadership

The number of wide-ranging leadership issues paints a grim picture of the many problems employees in the library service industry face. Thus, this initial talk on leadership at Charleston Conference was a move in the right direction, and the authors hope further discussion will take place.

A number of people also contributed their perspectives vocally. One pointed out that there is a plan beneath the strategic plan, but it is difficult to specify what it is. One library leader said she hopes she is not toxic but said there are things that have to be done even if she is instructed from above for librarians not to be informed about it. Hollandsworth said there is difficulty in deciphering demands and the needs for change. "Change, for the sake of changing, because, for example, we've got a new strategic plan, can have an adverse effect on our mission" and "the mission of academic libraries being that of supporting the curriculum, and supporting the research of the faculty, students, and staff."

The speakers noted the loss of space for reference librarians and

materials to other functions that are more vocal, more "pushy" for space. One audience member expressed it as valuable if services are "pushed." "We have to push the library collection as much as other services are pushed," she said. Another audience member asked what is the choice between quitting and sitting here and complaining about a toxic leader? The speakers saw this as a good point to emphasize the necessity of librarians talking to university administration about toxic leadership in the library and the need for shared governance.

Differences in Leadership

It should be noted that our session on toxic leadership was combined with a presentation titled "When Your Destination Changes: Creating a Culture of Flexibility and Change." Although the two presentations were kept separate and allotted an equal amount of time during the combined lively luncheon, the differences in discussion on leadership could not be ignored. Derrik Hiatt wasted little time emphasizing pressure from above for change to be imposed on librarians. He designated that this mission of change comes in part from a book by Jim Collins, Good to Great, a business prescription that librarians should consider.

In the prior discussion, Hollandsworth made clear that librarians believe in change as much as anyone, not as business employees but as active participants who want to examine and discuss the nature of this change. Hiatt said there has to be a way to get those that do not agree "off the bus" and to get the followers without objections "on the bus," never assuming the dissenters may have some insight into changing their work. Those areas of work librarians did not want, Hiatt suggested a new position had to be created (e.g., managing stats and reports of all kinds). When asked what librarians should do if they disagree with a decision, Hiatt said "talk to your supervisors." Given that this was not a panel presentation and the two groups were presenting separately, there was no time to reconcile the dichotomous presentations (the shared governance versus the top-down).

Conclusion

At the root of toxicity in leadership is a problem with transparency. In Ortega's (2017) work Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership, the author speaks of a transparent channel of honesty

that flows from leaders to faculty librarians. One member of the audience, a dean, voiced a reluctance to be honest with the faculty because they are told from above not to share certain information with faculty. In the follow-up session delivered by Hiatt, we found the opposite of our pledge for a healthy, open organization. The later session talked of reorganizing librarians and grouping them into new teams, noting the "lazy" ones, which can be assumed to be based on "gossip" of employees who wanted to change. The opposing employees were to be removed. Deans should work to find ways to be honest and avoid concealing news from their librarians. This goes a long way toward combating toxicity. In addition, library leaders of all kinds (not just administrators) should be presenting on these ideas at multiple library conferences to further create healthier work environments across all types of libraries.

Finally, it should be noted that Ortega explains successful leadership should focus on creating an environment of trust and professionalism and one in which "leaders who care about theory libraries' place within the larger institution and advocate to make the library a better environment for everyone, not just themselves" (2017, p. 6). Ortega adds:

Librarians also like leaders who are humble, understanding, genuine, good communicators, competent, intelligent, visionary, strategic, empathetic, good listeners, hardworking, responsible, enthusiastic, team players, encouraging, caring, innovative, purposeful, confident, dedicated, receptive to input from librarians and staff, adaptable to the changing needs of academic libraries and higher education, and most importantly, prompt in decision making. (p. 6)

It is the hope of the authors that academic librarians and administrators strongly consider discussing the issues of leadership

more openly so as to move the profession forward in a positive direction.

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Appendix A

Suggested Discussion Questions

To get the audience thinking about the issues confronting them, the following questions
were posed:

Losing Librarians:

How has your work, or a colleague's work, been affected by leadership?

Have you ever considered leaving your job because of toxic leadership?

How did you handle it?

Taking Action:

How can keeping the institution's leadership informed about a problem leader help?

What support can library conferences provide to create more leadership discussions?

Appendix B

Appendix B: Responses from a Padlet Asking Attendees to Share Some of the Issues They See in Leadership from Their Libraries

Works Cited

Fyn, A. F., Heady, C., Foster-Kaufman, A., & Hosier, A. (2019). Why we leave: Exploring academic librarian turnover and retention strategies. ACRL 19th National Conference, "Recasting the Narrative."

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