

Collaborative Leadership: A Model for Reference Services

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SUMMARY. In 1991, Joseph C. Rost published *Leadership for the 21st Century* (Praeger) in which he presented a definition of leadership that focused on the influence relationship among leaders and followers rather than on the traits of the leader or the functions of leadership. Rost's model is useful for academic reference leaders who usually head a group of professionals who are involved in a variety of responsibilities that require them to be leaders. This article applies Rost's theories to academic reference leadership and explores a model that will provide for better job satisfaction for librarians and improved services to library users. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Web-site: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

It is redundant, of course, to state that academic libraries have changed over the last fifteen years. They have transformed from build-

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ings with collections of materials to dynamic organizations that provide access to vast resources. Academic reference departments and the nature of reference work have been impacted significantly by this transformation. While WHAT reference librarians do is not so different—we still assist users in finding and evaluating information, provide instruction in using resources, and select materials—HOW we do it, however, and the tools and resources we use have changed dramatically. Reference departments have responded to these changes by providing new services and restructuring their organizations to be more efficient. Libraries have experimented with tiered reference service, using paraprofessionals at service desks to allow professional librarians time for other responsibilities and implementing team structures to provide public service. With new technologies available, reference service has expanded to include such innovations as e-mail reference, online tutorials and user guides, and real-time digital reference service. The issue of leadership for academic reference departments in this age of transformation, however, has not been carefully examined. While there have been numerous articles about the *types* of leaders needed for academic libraries and the *functions* that these leaders should perform, the actual *process* of leading an academic reference department has not been adequately explored.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FOR TRANSFORMATION

The issue of the leadership process is not unique to librarianship but has also been a controversy in leadership studies. In his 1978 landmark study, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns lamented:

If we know all too much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership. We fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age and hence we cannot agree even on the standards by which to measure, recruit, and reject it. Is leadership simply innovation-cultural or political? Is it essentially inspiration? Mobilization of followers? Goal setting? Goal fulfillment? Is a leader the definer of values? Satisfier of needs? If leaders require followers, who lead whom from where to where, and why? How do leaders lead followers without being wholly led by followers? Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.¹

Burns was further frustrated that neither had a school of leadership been developed nor had there been literature that combined theories of leadership and followership. Burns identified two basic types of leadership—transactional and transforming. He defined transactional leadership as the relationship between most leaders and followers whereby leaders approach followers with the purpose of exchanging one thing for another, such as jobs for votes. On the other hand, according to Burns, transforming leadership seeks to engage followers more completely and can potentially turn followers into leaders.²

While Burns' book is a classic text, he still did not provide a cogent definition of leadership. In 1991, Joseph C. Rost published *Leadership for the Twenty First Century*, in which he attempted to provide a definition for leadership in the post-industrial age. Rost built on Burns' theory of transforming leadership. He was highly critical of leadership scholarship and claimed that no plausible definition had been provided. He further asserted that leadership studies had focused entirely too much on leadership traits, personality characteristics, goals, and management of organizations. According to Rost, leadership studies had been more interested in content rather than the actual process of leadership.³ He contended that scholars and practitioners emphasized leadership's peripheral elements and content instead of the "essential nature of leadership as a relationship."⁴

After a thorough analysis of leadership scholarship from the early part of the 20th century through the 1980s, Rost offered a definition of leadership for the post-industrial world: "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."⁵ Rost thus emphasized the *relationship* between leaders and followers as opposed to focusing only on the leader and his/her traits. "Leadership is not what the leader does but what the leaders and collaborators do together to change organizations."⁶ He further embellished his definition by explaining that the influence relationship is multidirectional and noncoercive. Both leaders and followers must intend changes and these changes must be substantive and transforming. According to Rost, leaders and followers develop mutual purposes rather than goals.⁷ He further recommended that organizations effect change by:

1. Deciding on the proposed change.
2. Leaders and followers influencing others in the organization to support the change.

3. Planning the change by leaders and followers developing an outline that reflects their mutual purposes.
4. Gathering and analyzing information and deciding on the direction.
5. Building the agenda.⁸

While Rost emphasized the importance of noncoercive influence between leaders and followers and the need for followers to be an active part of the leadership process, he still realized that it is an unequal relationship. Leaders usually have more influence because “they are willing to commit more of the power resources they possess to the relationship and they are more skilled at putting those power resources to work to influence others in the relationship.”⁹ At the same time, there are times when followers may exert more influence than leaders and will take initiative to accomplish certain purposes. Thus, followers can become leaders and are active in the leadership relationship rather than passive recipients of the leader’s influence.¹⁰

TRANSFORMATION OF REFERENCE SERVICES

Over the past decade, the needs of academic library users have altered considerably. Because students and faculty can access catalogs, databases, and full-text resources remotely, traffic at the traditional reference desk has dropped dramatically. At the same time, the demand for instruction and training has risen because users need much guidance in using these electronic resources effectively.¹¹ Changes in higher education have affected libraries as well. Distance learning initiatives and returning adult students require new library services such as 24/7 off-campus access to resources, off-campus training, direct document delivery and remote assistance in using resources.

Reference leaders have explored numerous methods to restructure reference service to respond to these changing needs. One of the first reports was Virginia Massey-Burzio’s 1992 article that described the tiered reference service at Brandeis University. Brandeis established an information desk that was staffed by graduate students to handle routine directional questions while in-depth research inquiries were handled by appointments with reference librarians. Massey-Burzio argued that most questions received at the reference desk were very routine and professional librarians’ time and expertise was much better spent focusing on specialized research.¹² Numerous other articles appeared

throughout the 1990s that recommended tiered reference service, using paraprofessionals at the reference desk, sending librarians out to academic departments, floating reference librarians, cooperative reference, and developing expert systems to handle routine questions.¹³

These models of restructuring reference were consistent with trends in academic libraries in the 1990s. Many libraries experimented with new structures both to provide better customer service and also to offer new opportunities for librarians and staff.¹⁴ In particular, Richard Sweeney in his 1994 article, "Leadership in the Post-Hierarchical Library," called for a complete reengineering of the library that focused on customer satisfaction. Sweeney recommended cross functional, networked teams which would require excellent communication and result in distributed decision-making and better accountability.¹⁵ The team structure was implemented in many libraries including the University of Arizona. There, librarians focused on meeting the needs of users by examining the mission of the library, critically examining the value of their work activities, and making productive changes. Staff from many units of the library participated in public service teams and discovered new skills and qualities they did not know they had.¹⁶

Since the late 1990s, the increased use of the Web as an information source and as a platform for service has created further implications for reference services. Students rely on the Web for much of their research and it is a new challenge for librarians to guide students to reliable resources. Some reference librarians feel very threatened by the dwindling numbers of reference questions and are concerned that they will be replaced by search engines and commercial enterprises.¹⁷ Librarians have responded by utilizing current technology to adapt their services to contemporary needs. New developments such as online tutorials, online reference, subject portals, online user guides and personalized library interfaces have been implemented in many academic libraries. Reference departments, however, usually continue to be structured in a traditional manner and around a specific place. In a 2000 *College and Research Libraries* article, Chris Ferguson provided a comprehensive model for reference services in the 21st century. Ferguson urged librarians to envision desirable services and then determine what structures and support services are necessary to support these services.¹⁸ He recommended a combination of on-site and off-site services ranging from online user aids and chat reference service to appointments with subject specialists.¹⁹ To implement such a tiered service, librarians must explore new roles and functions and collaborate across administrative lines both within and without the library. The role of the reference

leader, according to Ferguson, is to bring people and resources together to facilitate change in innovative and productive ways.²⁰

REFERENCE LEADERSHIP FOR TRANSFORMATION

With all the myriad discussions on how to restructure reference services, there has been very little work on reference leadership or management during this age of transformation. One article by Maureen Sullivan explored extensively the middle-management role in libraries and identified elements similar to Rost. She noted that as support staff perform more computer work, library managers have less direct knowledge of the work they supervise and rely on staff to solve their own problems. Because of this trend, the manager's role has shifted away 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."²¹ Sullivan recommended that library middle managers establish working relationships based on trust and mutual respect, allow themselves to be influenced as well as exercise influence and share power by creating meaningful opportunities for staff involvement in problem solving, decision making, and planning.²²

Barbara Dewey provided one of the few analyses of leadership among those who are usually thought of as "followers" in libraries. She examined the leadership qualities needed by front-line public service librarians, especially entry or mid-level librarians. She suggested that they must be adept managers of programs, services, and activities and provide leadership in evaluating library services, designing library instruction programs and managing specific projects.²³

Only one article in recent years addressed leadership and the head of reference position specifically. In 1994, Nofsinger and Bosch outlined the specific roles of this position and identified necessary people-management functions such as training and coordination, socialization and the corporate culture, supervision and daily operations, communication, and performance evaluation. They also stressed the role of technology facilitator.²⁴ They primarily focused on these specific functions and did not address leadership except to note:

As a front line manager, the head of reference accomplishes work through team leadership of colleagues and other staff in a climate of trust and respect. Frequently the reference manager leads by

pulling rather than pushing, inspires rather than orders, jointly sets expectations for service and then works side-by-side with colleagues to accomplish them, and empowers others to use their own initiative and unique abilities.²⁵

THE COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR REFERENCE LEADERS

Rost's theory of transforming leadership has useful applications for academic reference departments. Like their teaching faculty colleagues, reference librarians are often very independent and creative thinkers. Collaborative leadership can take advantage of such minds and result in better services and programs for users as well as increased job satisfaction for all members of the unit. In addition to public service, reference librarians usually have numerous other responsibilities such as library instruction, subject liaisons or bibliographers, campus faculty obligations, and professional service. They often assume leadership roles in the department or library such as supervision of graduate students, library instruction coordination or collection management. Younger librarians who may be more technologically savvy usually take on leadership in that area by serving as webmasters and developing online aids. Many of these responsibilities, especially those that reach outside the library, take place away from the direct supervision of the department head. Because these activities can foster needed library services as well as professional growth, they need to be encouraged and supported by the reference head. Ideas for new services and programs should come from all members of the unit. Team members should accept the leadership role for these projects; the team leader can assume the follower role and, at the same time, provide overall support. This cooperation creates an atmosphere that shares knowledge, encourages creativity and results in better service for library users. In addition, collaborative leadership provides more opportunity for job enrichment and professional development.

A useful example of collaborative leadership was the trial of chat reference service implemented at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Spring 2001. This trial followed Rost's process of collaborative leadership described earlier. The reference department decided to explore this new service (proposed change). The most qualified person to lead the effort was the newest librarian in the department who had the most technical knowledge (leaders and followers influencing others). She researched software, set up the trial, trained others to use

the software, recruited assistance from the technology unit, and scheduled librarians to cover the service (planning the change). After the trial was completed, the department discussed the trial and its strengths and weaknesses (gathering and analyzing information). With some changes, we decided to continue the service the following fall (building the agenda).

This project was truly a collaborative effort with a librarian from the team providing leadership while others in the unit, including the department head, assumed the role of followers. Because we were one unit, in a larger organization, it was the responsibility of the department head to ensure that this project was a priority and to work with library administration and other library units to gain support for software, equipment and other resources. By bringing together the talents and knowledge of several people, a successful project was designed and implemented and a new service was developed.

While Rost's model provides a useful framework for the leadership process, there are flaws. Although Rost rejected identifying specific traits for leaders, there are certain abilities that successful library leaders (or any leader) must have. In this time of major change in academic libraries, it is especially imperative that leaders be able to embrace innovation and experiment with new opportunities. Indeed, Rebecca Martin in her article "Library Leaders for the 21st Century" stated that managing change and viewing change as an opportunity will likely be the most critical criteria for academic library leaders.²⁶ Sweeney recommended leaders that are strategists with a vision and the will to achieve it. He also argued that leaders must also be superb communicators who listen, speak, and write well and are creative and encourage creativity in others. In addition, leaders must be risk-takers.²⁷ A January 2001 *Library Issues Briefings for Faculty and Administrators* stated that library leaders will require "an extraordinary ability to maintain a delicate and continually shifting balance in the management of technical, financial, and human resources to serve the academic mission of our colleges and universities."²⁸

These traits and functions can be applied more specifically to reference leaders. Reference heads must have a thorough knowledge of traditional and current reference practices and be able to balance between them. As mentioned above, they must be risk-takers in order to move reference services forward into the 21st century. Reference leaders need to develop a vision for their unit and articulate that vision within the unit and to the library and campus. It is well established that excellent com-

munication skills are essential for any leader. As middle managers, reference heads must be able to communicate well with his/her team and also collaborate effectively with other units and library administration. In other words, they need to communicate up, down, and across! As supervisors, reference leaders also need to be effective motivators and serve as mentors to new librarians.

Training for leadership in libraries is obviously a major issue and one that probably deserves an entire article of its own. MLS programs do not usually provide enough management or leadership education so librarians need to take advantage of other opportunities such as business school classes, workshops, professional seminars, and other types of continuing education in order to gain leadership and communication skills. Academic libraries need to provide opportunities for staff to take advantage of leadership education. Developing current and future leaders will ensure strong libraries for the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

In this age of transformation in libraries, reference departments are responding to many changes in information needs. They are offering new programs and developing new methods to provide traditional services. To facilitate these changes reference units need to examine their organizational structure and leadership processes. Rost's collaborative model can serve as a useful paradigm for the leadership process. His definition of leadership, which focused on the relationships involved rather than specific characteristics, seems especially applicable in the 21st century. In order to provide the complex variety of services needed for higher education, reference departments need librarians with many types of knowledge and skills who should provide leadership when a project falls into their area of expertise. Such collaboration within a unit or team encourages creative thinking and increased productivity. Furthermore, reference departments need to work across units in order to provide excellent services. Work teams are often created where the leader is not a direct supervisor. Here, the influence relationship becomes particularly emphasized. Collaborative leadership, then, is a model that can create a positive and productive working environment that serves both employees and customers well.

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