

## The value of transparency

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[Crumpton, Michael A.](#) (2011), "The value of transparency", *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, Vol. 24 Iss: 2 pp. 125 - 128

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### **Abstract:**

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to discuss the need for transparency in leadership during tough financial times.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This point-of-view is enhanced with related literature references from the business community.

**Findings** – This point-of-view demonstrates the long-term benefits to transparent behavior.

**Practical implications** – The development of leadership skills related to transparency can lead to improved effectiveness as a leader.

**Originality/value** – This article is reflective of the author's personal experiences in providing effective leadership during tough times.

### **Article:**

The engagement of leadership can be at its best or at its worst during tough times. In business environments during periods of economic uncertainty business leaders are forced to make critical decisions in order to ensure the survival of the organization. Leaders within government organizations become faced with the same tough dilemmas usually with a different set of circumstances attached, but still fighting for the survival of the organization. And libraries are also working their way through major decision making initiatives in order to sustain and support some type of organizational identity. In addition to budgetary considerations, libraries are also undergoing other changes related to products and services, users' needs and expectations and an individual's perception of the libraries' roles within their life and learning opportunities.

The impact of budgetary woes can have unpleasant consequences for many, both employees, stakeholders such as campus administrations or city/county governments for public libraries as well as patrons, customers, students, faculty and anyone who is need of library services. This can add stress and uncertainty to all of these groups involved and sometimes the only way to measure success is through the survival of the organization at whatever cost to the individuals involved. And likewise the move to justify continued investment into library operations and services, as demonstrated through recent models of return on investment (ROI) activities, as well as reorganizations or strategic planning initiatives that create changes toward greater efficiency in methods or techniques and workflows, can move organizational stress off the scale.

All of these activities, driving change and organizational review require strong leadership to guide and manage the organizational stress that will be sure to grow. And this will be a different type of leadership role for library administrators because of the external forces that might influence perceptions and opinions of staff and stakeholders. So it is critical that leaders maintain the trust and confidence of their staffs, who in turn will keep the support of the patron base, which in turn supports the organizational need for purpose. To maintain this trust, leaders must be transparent in how information gathering and decisions are made.

[Kouzes and Posner \(1995\)](#), in their classic book on leadership, *The Leadership Challenge*, define leadership as; “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspiration.” This can be interpreted to include mobilizing others to persevere during tough times for the good of the organization. And Kouzes and Posner focus in that definition on the words, “want to,” which they feel drives the difference between leadership and simply managing someone else’s work. This is describing motivation which can also involve a variety of emotions from both the motivator and persons to be motivated.

Those emotions can be more sensitive when financial worries are involved and which is when people might tend to believe anything, correct or incorrect, in order to satisfy an emotional response to information that has not been verified. So the first important issue that drives transparent behavior is communication and helping people get the facts straight in the beginning and without emotional uncertainty. Even when it is bad news, communicating transparently can keep emotional uncertainty from creating more negative actions.

A good example of the importance of transparency as it relates to change and the communication process involved comes from the business world and how many of the bail-outs were handled such as in banking or the automotive industry. Laura [Lopez \(2009\)](#), in *Leadership Excellence*, wrote in her March 2009 column about transparency in motivating behaviors to achieve results, not rescue problem situations. She identified five rules of transparent behavior for leaders to consider in order to be able to motivate the organization in a positive way. These can be relevant in communicating organizational changes and actions from planning strategies within the library organization. Her five rules offer this advice:

1. Repeat your strategy and often, reminding people of the goals and objectives to be met.
2. Hear the concerns being expressed and allow for input from affected parties.
3. Isolate individual needs and concerns that might impact the larger group. Addressing people’s personal situations keeps this from affecting others unnecessarily.
4. Separate facts from fiction and hearsay, this addresses untruths that result from speculation or bias interpretation.
5. Own up to the bad news, challenging situations usually have bad or some unpleasantness associated with it, being up front about that is important to earning trust.

The issue of trust and the importance of developing and maintaining trusting relationships is another important reason why transparency can be so important. The authors of *Influencer* ([Patterson et al. 2008](#)), a recent business book about how to influence others and bring about needed change, discuss how people are far less likely to believe or accept what a leader says and does, if they have not established a degree of trust in that leader. These

behavioral scientists say that in order to gain trust, instead of just trying to convince people of a point of view, you have to maintain transparency in your planning and actions in order to have a leadership influence over your stakeholders or followers.

And a related point made in the book about trustworthiness is that leaders should have opinions based on their area of expertise. This is important to transparency and trust because leaders are not expected to simply “pass along” information but to have knowledgeable opinions and some expertise about the challenges and issues being discussed. In challenging times, library leaders might not agree with some of the tough decisions that need to be made, and having their own informed opinion is okay, as long as it is not hidden from view. These are the opportunities for future goals and strategies once matters are on the upswing again.

To add some research to this point of view about transparency and how being transparent is so important for library leaders during the tremendous changes taking place with struggling economic resources, please refer to a study published in *The Leadership Quarterly* (Norman *et al.*, 2010). This was a field experiment addressing leadership effectiveness in addressing turmoil and change or as stated in the experiment “within a downsizing event”. The article titled, “The impact of positivity and transparency on trust in leaders and their perceived effectiveness,” investigated the components of positivity and transparency on business leaders and their performances during a downsizing event. The results could apply to library leaders who are faced with the same issue, downsizing the organization but needing to maintain the trust and followership of the remaining individuals within the organization.

From this experiment one can pull from the data some of the behaviors and characteristics that accompany the successful leader regarding transparency and the building of transparent relationships with followers. For example:

- There must be a willingness to be vulnerable or exposed and to take risks in allowing others to see the planning process.
- The leader must to open communication, such as previously discussed, in which individuals or groups involved has a chance to voice opinions or concerns.
- Information should be shared that is relevant and holds up to scrutiny by people that are affected.
- Leaders must be forthcoming about motives and reasons behind decisions that are made.
- Leaders must know that this transparency exposes their own set of values and ethics related to the situation.

The authors also contend that the trust developed during this negative event or activity has long term benefits, both of increased effectiveness of that leader in leading the organization successfully through the adversity and also the productivity impact on the remaining organization members who now respect and trust such leaders at higher levels.

As libraries continue to maneuver through difficult economic conditions along with overall changes that are occurring over technology, user's needs and desires and related vendors and product enhancements, the typical library leader must develop the skills to move the organization forward understanding that some decisions will be less favorable than others. Becoming a

transparent leader can have positive outcomes for success as well as bestow confidence and optimism into a leader's persona.

### *References*

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