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Leadership is about you

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Leadership Is about You

<div align="right">by Ken Haycock</div>

Leadership remains an elusive, yet critical, component of a program's effectiveness. While most would suggest that leadership is easily recognized, this too often means that "managers" are simply supporting our particular interests and priorities. Indeed, we tend to want "strong leadership," unless it is exercised against our interests.

There are many theories and models of leadership. Most people have probably personally witnessed many of them. The worst, in my opinion, may be "laissez-faire" leadership (don't intervene until absolutely necessary) or even "weak" leadership, which may in fact be a contradiction in terms.

Although leadership studies focus on leaders and followers (or constituents), when we lead from the middle it is more appropriate to speak of colleagues, which will be the approach used here. The foundation of any strong, integrated school library program rests on the school librarian implementing, with colleagues, complex and demanding innovations like collaborative program planning and teaching and inquiry-based learning.

Theories of Leadership

Following are some of the more common theories (taken down to their bare essence) which relate to the role of the school librarian:

▶ Contingency, wherein leadership is primarily the exercise of social influence (e.g., absolutely necessary to move colleagues to inquiry-based learning through collaboration);

▶ Path-goal, where motivation is influenced by the probability of certain behaviors leading to a specific and worthwhile goal (e.g., develop relationships, influence behaviors, collaborate, and improve student achievement);

▶ Situational, with the ability to balance both direction and support with the commitment and capability of others to undertake the task at hand (e.g., the planning process will be very different with the neophyte than with the experienced partner);

▶ Attribution, or how causes are assigned to interpersonal events as they occur (e.g., some school librarians are more successful in some settings than in others; some are more successful in certain situations than in others);

▶ Performance-maintenance, reaching goals while maintaining group stability (e.g., moving forward to a culture of collaboration without unnecessary or unmanaged conflict);

▶ Transactional, whereby legitimacy rests on perceptions of competence and honesty, fairness and mutual loyalty (e.g., no one is going to invest time working with someone who is not capable of adding value to the learning situation and committed to mutual success);

▶ Transformational, confidently maintaining a commitment to a vision, such that colleagues are more likely to meld their personal identity with that vision (e.g., a school librarian exuding confidence, committed to an integrated program based on trust and respect, is more likely to move colleagues to a shared vision without their feeling loss of individual and independent identities).

Leadership Defined

Just as there are many theories and models of leadership, and school librarians have "experienced" many of them, so too there are many definitions of leadership. Indeed, there are reportedly more than 300 definitions of leadership. So what is it exactly?

A definition that would be accepted by a majority of theorists and researchers, according to Martin Chemers, is that "leadership is a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task" (1997, 1). Leadership, then, is a group activity based on social influence. This supports the potential for "leadership from the middle," the position of the school librarian, but begs the question of the common task. Obviously (one would hope), the common element is student achievement and the quality of experiences of students and teachers in the school. How one addresses these goals, however, can be quite different. The common task for the school librarian, then, is to develop this process of social influence through which colleagues become committed to collaboration and instructional partnerships in order to enhance student learning.

A leader then is someone whom others follow where they would not neces-

sarily go alone. A leader is someone who rallies people to a better future. Leadership is thus a process more than a role. Of course this possibility of leadership is also based on complex relationships in changing environments.

The Focus of Leadership

Warren Bennis notes four core competencies of leaders: managing attention; managing meaning; managing trust; and managing oneself (1989).

Managing attention, that is, communicating an extraordinary focus of commitment, requires that the school librarian articulate a compelling vision in the context of goals and directions around which others can galvanize their efforts. It is critical that the more mundane aspects of program administration or lower level service priorities do not become seen as the preferred outcome.

Managing meaning, that is, making dreams apparent to others and communicating through meaningful models and examples, is supported by the school librarian who brings clarity to what a strong, integrated school library program looks like and how the program and the players will look different in, e.g., five years. Progress needs to be attainable as is the necessary support and scaffolding.

Managing trust, especially through constancy such that colleagues know where the school librarian stands, ensures that there are no surprises and services are consistent and accountable.

Managing oneself, key to effective leadership, is knowing the extent of one's skills and applying them effectively. Through such self-awareness comes self-confidence as competence and capabilities grow. The element common to all leaders is self-confidence.

Gardner (1990) similarly defines four leadership tasks: envisioning goals [you can see them in practice]; affirming values [you value collaboration and partnerships]; motivating [you are skilled at social persuasion]; and managing [you

are efficient and effective, recognizing the difference between the urgent and the important, delegating whatever is possible to delegate, even to younger students].

Another piece of this puzzle is identifying specific abilities and strengths. Over many years, the Gallup organization has conducted research in thousands of organizations only to find that few people are able to articulate their strengths. A person can outline his or her qualifications, experiences, and even point to some significant accomplishments, but is not able to specify and articulate the underlying strengths that led to these actions. An individual is then engaged due to the perception of his or her strengths but evaluated based on weaknesses and told to correct those weaknesses. More and more research in strategic human relations management, however, is identifying the importance of hiring for talent/strengths and then encouraging the use and development of those strengths.

The works of Rath (2007) and Rath and Conchie (2008) enable a person to take an online assessment of their strengths. This assessment provides (of thirty-four possibilities) the top five strengths with a description of each and how each might be developed. Identification of strengths

is

important for several reasons. First, it provides an individual insight into natural areas of interest and preference for development. Second, it helps determine whether an individual's current work environment and current position help him or her work with strengths (if not, a person may find that he or she is unhappy in a position without knowing why). Third, it allows individuals to soar, to really demonstrate what they can do. The later
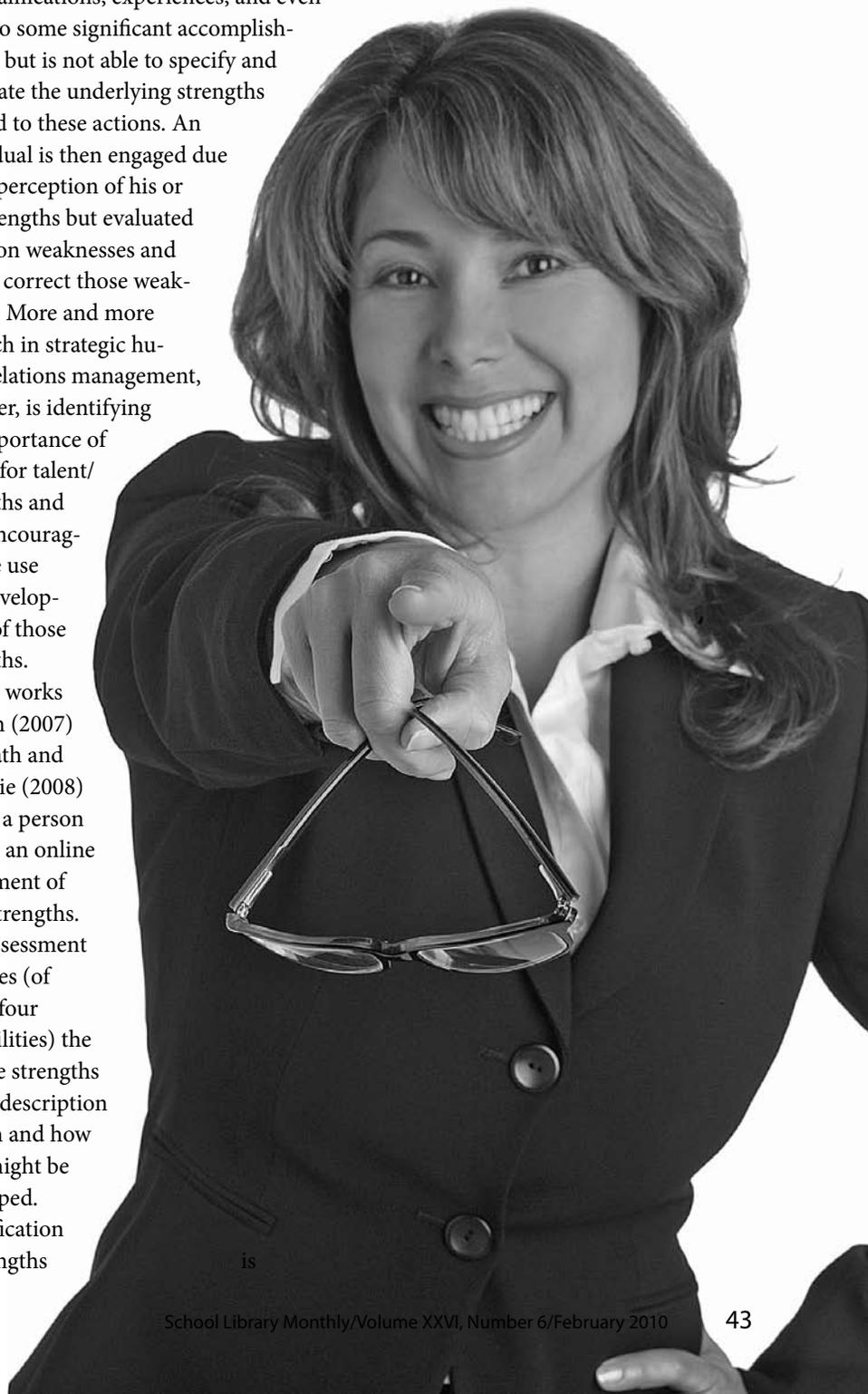
work of Rath and Conchie focuses on specific domains of leadership strength: executing, influencing, relationship building, strategic thinking (2008).

Leadership Is about Appropriate Behaviors

Bringing this together, then, suggests that effective leadership involves three major functions (Chemer 1997):

▶ Image management, the school librarian's ability to project an image consistent with colleagues' expectations; this, of course, is challenging as many studies of teacher expectations show that colleagues expect less than professional level work; even those teachers motivated to work with a school librarian start by seeing the position as a service role rather than an instructional partnership.

▶ Relationship development, success in creating and sustaining motivated and competent colleagues; this means being able to bring ideas to the fore, being confident and capable enough to inspire confidence in one's ability, and engendering a sense of adventure in the work.

▶ Resource utilization, deploying the assets of both self and others (including student and adult volunteers) to accomplishing the mission, to ensuring that collaboration and leadership are priorities.

Chemers also suggests two factors make a difference in leadership behaviors: 1) consideration, that is, open communication with colleagues, mutual trust and respect, and interpersonal warmth, coupled with 2) initiation of structure, to organize and structure group activities, define relationships, and organize colleagues to task accomplishment (1997). The former demands respect for the classroom teacher's world and challenges, and respect for his or her expertise and potential contributions. The latter suggests the need for greater scaffolding for the planning process, ensuring good questioning ability around partnerships and instructional goals, a planning guide with indications of the type of information and support required from each of the partners.

Successful leaders are skilled at group goal facilitation, able to move the group forward to task accomplishment; group sociability, able to interact socially and to work effectively to gain acceptance as a colleague and partner; and individual prominence, with behaviors to make him or her stand out with a distinct contribution. When working to motivate colleagues, school librarians will only be successful if they think that their efforts may be accepted, that the challenge will be worthwhile, and that eventually they will be successful.

Confidence in offering guidance, in motivating others with sensitivity, flexibility, and creativity, is crucial. School librarians can introduce new ideas to a staff or faculty if they are perceived to have competence and if they are seen as loyal to the group.

It then comes down to persuasion and negotiation. Leaders influence people to follow. One can't force them to get on board. The right attitude, projection of the right images, and the best of relationships all count.

Above All, Leadership Is about You

The first person you manage and lead is, of course, yourself. It is important to be both efficient (necessary for survival and to give attention to what really matters) and effective (necessary for success in achieving your programmatic goals).

Leadership is about social influence, enlisting the engagement and support of others in achievement of a common task. However, to be influential, you need to be self-aware, focused, and competent; to be able to develop strong relationships and partnerships; and to exhibit trust, honesty, and respect.

You are not merely born with these attributes but rather they are developed and learned over time.

Leaders also want to leave a "footprint," a legacy. For you as a school librarian, these are the quality of experiences of teachers and students in the school during your tenure and the development of student abilities that form a foundation for their future learning.

School librarians are leaders and when you exhibit these leadership traits, you can move a common agenda forward. You can develop strong and healthy communities of learners, not alone, but through networking and influence. You can also add value as community leaders with a clearly defined niche or area of expertise and contribution.

Successful school librarians are not simply focused on getting the message out. They are concerned about connecting agendas, about collaborating, about being "at the table" when instructional issues are discussed and analyzed and solutions proposed.

The choice is really yours. What kind of leader do you wish to become? What kind of relationships do you wish to develop? What kind of impact do you intend to have? What kind of difference do you expect to make in the lives of teachers and students?

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