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## **Lateral Leadership in Action**

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## **Lateral Leadership in Action**

Lateral leaders influence, persuade, and elicit constructive contributions from others at all levels of an organization. In this paper, the authors build off their 2021 Brick & Click Conference Proceedings paper and weave in their own perspectives and experiences of lateral leadership in action through a discussion of (1) the importance and role of lateral leadership in today's organizations; (2) how using a strategic mindset can steer problem solving; (3) ways to identify, cultivate, and support lateral leaders; (4) strategies to build trust and empower others as a peer; and (5) techniques for working thoughtfully with teams as a lateral leader.

Keywords: lateral leadership; library leadership; organizational effectiveness; educational leadership; strategic thinking

### **Introduction**

Today's libraries, like corporations worldwide, are learning to operate in a state of constant change. COVID-19 pushed the world into new ways of doing business and elucidated the reality that organizational structures are flattening; traditional boundaries separating employee roles are blurring; collaborations are critical for survival; innovation and creative thinking must be a priority; and, the "upward flow of information and downward flow of decisions and directives - have been abandoned in favor of leaner, more direct flows of information and decision-making" (Rosen, 2017, para. 3). In these new models of functioning, a cross section of leaders, including those in traditional leadership roles, as well as informal leaders who can lead from any point within an organization, must be valued, cultivated, and supported, in order to elicit ideas, maintain cross departmental communication streams with stakeholders at all levels, and drive change that leads to optimal results.

In this article, the authors expand upon their previously published work (Croxtton, Moore, & Saines, 2021); draw from leadership principles discussed in

business, health care, and social science literature; and interweave vignettes about their own lateral leadership experiences and perspectives. The lateral leadership concepts and principles discussed in this article expand the limited coverage of lateral leadership or leading from the middle in today's libraries for making sound decisions and building tomorrow's leaders. The discussion includes topics related to: (1) the importance and role of lateral leadership in today's organizations; (2) how using a strategic mindset can steer problem solving; (3) ways to identify, cultivate, and support lateral leaders; (4) strategies to build trust and empower others as a peer; and (5) communication techniques for working thoughtfully with teams as a lateral leader.

### ***Lateral leadership: definitions and importance***

This article focuses on lateral leadership as differentiated from vertical or traditional leadership. It clearly focuses on leadership rather than management. A few characteristics of leaders should be emphasized before discussing lateral leadership. Leaders “generate value over and above that which the team creates and [are] ...value creator[s]. Leading by example and leading by enabling people are the hallmarks of action-based leadership ... Leaders create circles of influence. ... Leaders [possess the] ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward organizational success” (Nayar, 2013). Leadership can be defined as “using our behavior to influence others to willingly follow an idea, process or vision for the common good” (Mierke, 2014, p. 69).

Kühl et al. (2005) described a lateral leader as one who “utilizes a process of creating shared understanding, changing power games and generating trust for one’s own purposes” with powerful positive results, including “disrupt[ing] rigid patterns of thought, combin[ing] the divergent interests of the people involved and build[ing] trust.” Lateral leadership appears in the literature of business, psychology, sociology,

education, medicine, science, and other professions. Lateral leaders might be peer leaders, coordinators, interim leaders, team leaders, thought leaders, informal leaders, project leaders, or facilitators. They are individuals who lead, but are not the bosses. Lateral leaders have found success in positions of informal leadership by promoting productivity through conviction, communication, listening, motivating, influencing, persuading, negotiating, and building shared understanding and trust. They might be labeled change agents who possess a positive attitude and a strategic mindset.

According to Bleich and Jones-Schnek (2019, p. 390), "Lateral leaders challenge the status quo, realizing that policies, procedures, algorithms, and protocols emanating from hierarchical designs are suspect as part of the problem, [they] show capacity for exploring problem solving options via their expansive and nuanced experiences, collaboratively engage in creating a culture of inclusion, and remain curious, listening and inquiring with intention." According to Sloane & Sloan, lateral leaders "lead from alongside, ... develop new methods and seek to change the rules, change partners or change the approach to the problem, harness the abilities of others, and have a vision and use it to inspire others" (2017, p. 14).

It is helpful to distinguish lateral leadership from vertical leadership, which emerges from hierarchical organizational structures. Hernandez & Varkey (2008) typify lateral thinking as outside the box of how organizations traditionally develop new ideas - in a top-down fashion. Lateral thinking emphasizes creativity much like the Google and Apple approach to software and application development (Pisano, 2015). Rather than focusing on a specific and detailed area of expertise, employees are encouraged to delve into any area of interest and apply both basic common sense and their experience with previous successful projects to design solutions alone and with others. Asking

questions, resisting “no,” and trying new ideas that others might discard are the foundation of positive change in lateral thinking and leadership.

Several terms related to lateral leadership to describe the same phenomenon are common in the literature. A widely used definition of informal leadership, which stems from work by Schneier and Goktepe (1983), is "a team member's demonstrated influence in the team that cannot be attributed to formal authority" (Guo et al., 2022, p. 900). According to Flocco et al. (2021), “informal leadership...relies on the idea that any organization member may exert influence and become a de facto leader, through their ability to mobilize others to action independently of the trappings of formal designation or hierarchy” (p. 500). According to Lawson and Fleshman, “informal leaders add an additional pillar in the existing leadership structure without increasing costs” (2020, p. 3).

Emergent leadership “is a type of horizontal leadership, where, in a flattening team structure, a team member based on some of his/her specific characteristics, gains an influence over the team members, or is perceived as a leader by team members, despite not having any formal authority over the team” (Tabassum et al., 2023, p. 1). Emergent leaders “eagerly raise new ideas, look for efficiencies, identify solutions to problems, and actively foster productive and positive conversations” (Mierke, 2014, p. 74). Lateral, informal, and emergent leadership all share an inspirational approach rather than the direct approach of formal leaders (Sloane & Sloan, 2017, p. 14).

### ***Importance of lateral leadership***

Organizations need to cultivate people and provide opportunities for a variety of individuals to lead groups and help the organization move forward. A few key roles that lateral leaders play in today's organizations, including working across hierarchical structures to accomplish strategic goals, are depicted in Figure 1. Leaders from two

levels or more below the dean or director and throughout the organization may not be hampered by regular supervisory burdens and an inward, functional focus that often impedes forward strategic movement by unit leaders. Nevertheless, middle managers, while occupying leadership roles in the traditional, hierarchical organizational structure, may also possess the skills of a lateral leader including: entrepreneurial ideas, broad and deep informal network connections across the organization, understanding of employee needs and moods, ability to manage the tension between continuity and change, communication skills, self-confidence, the benefit of respect and trust from others, and the ability to shape a message that is closely aligned with the perceptions and goals of individuals and teams (Huy, 2001).

Lateral leaders who have cultivated a broad set of relationships and coalitions with others throughout the organization and beyond can be extremely influential in leading strategic, cross-disciplinary, and cross-departmental projects. They help individuals get out of the mold of their current roles and advance priorities and projects. They often create solutions through consultation rather than determining the solution themselves and persuading others to adopt it. They are more authentic in their approach to solving problems than other types of leaders (Johnson, 2003).

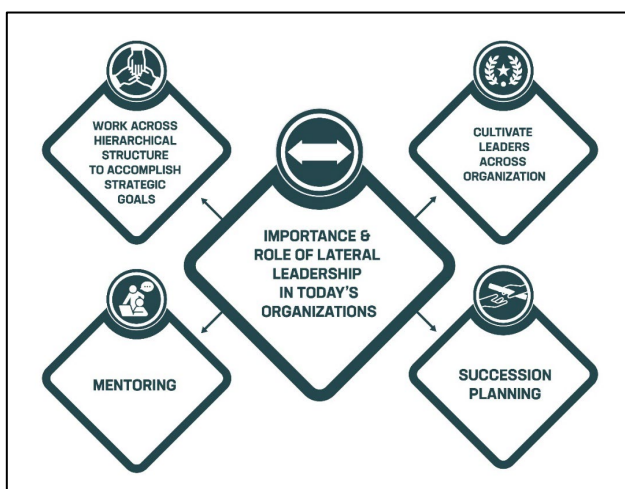


Figure 1. Importance & role of lateral leadership in today's organizations

Today's libraries feature a variety of "coordinator" roles occupied by specialists who work across the hierarchical or flattened structure of an organization to accomplish strategic goals. Lateral leaders may be individuals equipped with deep expertise in a particular area. They frequently report to the dean or an associate dean and run key committees that implement strategic change and progress. Digital scholarship, strategic planning, assessment, website, staff development, marketing, and event coordination may be just some of their focus areas. These individuals can help the organization innovate and accomplish strategic goals because they can work as equals across the organization and apply personalized approaches.

Libraries benefit from identifying employees who have respectful relationships with others, have chemistry, have good listening skills, are not trapped in a functional silo (Johnson, 2003), and are good at persuading and negotiating without imposing their own perspectives. Individuals with these skills are lateral or informal leaders who may be attuned to employee moods, experiences, and desires and may be more successful in leading strategic and change-oriented projects than those with positional power. They may put others at ease with a non-threatening style and hence liberate the best in all participants. And they may have innovative ideas or extract such ideas successfully from others in the organization. Lateral leadership has significant strengths in a variety of situations in organizations. In particular,

... when a holistic approach is needed, lateral leadership is most able to identify how systems are embedded within other systems and how the parts will be affected. Lateral leadership is ideal for exploration, experimentation, and anticipation of individual, professional, organizational, or social consequences that may impede change—it can create movements, tap energy, and message for impact and action which requires keen communication, preparation, and implementation skills (Bleich, 2019, p. 390).



Lateral leadership can also have beneficial effects for lateral leaders themselves as research findings indicate that individuals who are given opportunities to lead tend to be happier, have greater levels of workplace satisfaction, and have been found to be more committed, productive, motivated, and elicit the best ideas from others that will drive optimal results (Rosen, 2017; Zak, 2017). According to Lawson and Fleshman, lateral or informal leaders have higher job satisfaction than others (2020, p. 16).

### ***Using a strategic mindset to steer problem solving and resolution***

Lateral leaders are innovative, creative, and see the big picture. They approach projects with a clear, strategic mindset that is not distracted by unit or functional silos and politics. Use of this strategic mindset helps lateral leaders steer problem solving and resolution, as depicted in Figure 2. They maintain an objective, mile-high viewpoint that is grounded in the mission, vision, values, strategic plan, and annual goals and objectives. A lateral leader is a “proactive, highly ethical, change agent, who not only strives to reach his or her full potential, but also inspires others to reach the desired goal” (Lawson & Fleshman, 2020, p. 18).

Lateral leaders build shared understanding by listening carefully and asking probing questions to delve into perspectives and surface alternative possibilities. They might probe the meaning of terminology across different groups and develop new vocabulary out of shared understanding. They may bring group and individual political games and conflicts to the surface and broaden them if helpful or change (or exchange) them if they are counter-productive to the library's goals. They may invite new individuals to the table to change the dynamics and bring in new energy and ideas. They may guide the group to develop new policies, procedures, processes, or tools that benefit the organization as a whole. Most importantly, the above characteristics and activities of lateral leaders will generate trust that may energize problem-solving and

teamwork and accomplish goals that would not otherwise be accomplished (Kühl et al., 2005).

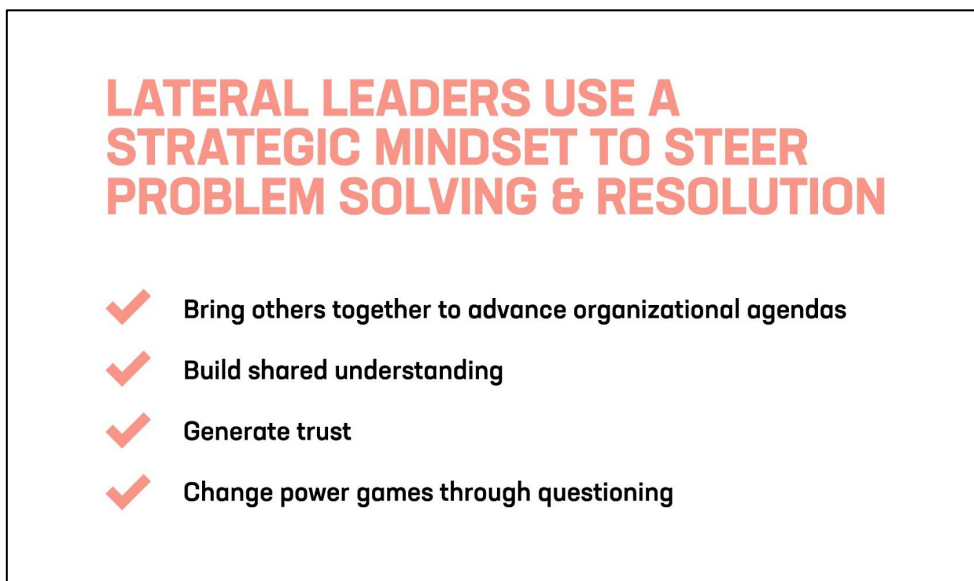


Figure 2: Lateral leaders use a strategic mindset

Lateral leaders are not just individuals. To guide large, strategic projects, it may be beneficial to pair a positional leader with a lateral leader in a form of shared leadership, which is “lateral influence among peers” (Zhu et al., 2018, p. 837). It may also be effective to recruit two informal leaders or employees who have not yet chaired a library-wide project or committee to team up as co-chairs, so they can help one another build their strategic mindset and leadership skills.

**Lateral Leadership in Action**  
*Anne Cooper Moore, Library Dean*

*One route that has been successful at UNC Charlotte's J. Murrey Atkins Library is through cross-unit standing committees (e.g., Accessibility Committee, the Website Advisory Group, Strategic Planning). While most of these committees have standing members with specific roles in the library, they also have volunteer slots that are open to anyone. The library has recently revised the charge for many of these committees so that chairs or co-chairs are elected by the committee, thereby creating even more opportunities to lead laterally in non-permanent roles that allow employees to "try out" leadership in a low-risk, high rewards opportunity. With the support of other committee members, they can share some of the key skills that create successful project or committee outcomes such as organization, meeting management, brainstorming, listening, facilitation, research/environmental*

*scanning, project management, problem-solving, note-taking, and report-writing skills. A project or committee chair might not know all the details of a project at the outset, but carefully structuring meetings and acting on all ideas that surface in discussions will build trust amongst members and gradually result in a shared understanding of a way forward.*

### **Identifying, cultivating, and supporting lateral leaders**

Identifying and cultivating leaders in academic libraries takes a degree of intentionality that is not always required in other types of organizations. Bugg (2016) explains that:

Working to identify potential leaders can prove challenging in academic libraries because not everyone with the potential for leadership has received an opportunity to demonstrate that capacity. Additionally, libraries often allow a great deal of autonomy, which does not always provide staffers the occasion to showcase their leadership skills (pp. 492-493).

Thus, in addition to identifying potential lateral leaders, library administrators may need to cultivate new leaders by providing low-risk opportunities to "practice" leading, creating and encouraging emerging lateral leaders to participate in training and mentorship opportunities, and providing necessary support that enables lateral leaders to be successful.

#### ***Identifying potential lateral leaders***

Deans and directors should be on the lookout for people within the organization who possess lateral leadership qualities and encourage them to try out managing a team to build their confidence and then encourage them to assume more leadership roles that will benefit both the employee and the organization. Lateral leaders may possess a variety of attributes, including those illustrated in Figure 3. Sometimes, lateral leaders can be identified in the initial interview, but often it is when they have been on the job for a while that their ability to form informal relationships, listen, communicate, and earn the respect and trust of others gets noticed. Lubans (2009) describes lateral leaders

as "organizational spark plugs," those with "high energy, emotional intelligence, good humor, people skills, and a can-do attitude" (p. 88). Lubans further explains that spark plugs (aka lateral leaders) are particularly valuable for prompting change, as they are "action oriented, they learn from mistakes, adjust, ... do what common sense urges them to do, swerving past what tradition maintains and cutting through to the essentials" (2009, p. 89). Building off Lubans' work, Bugg (2016), further explains that lateral leaders "act on good ideas, initiate, need little encouragement, follow through, and collaborate (p. 493). In addition, lateral leaders are often individuals who demonstrate a high degree of self-efficacy (belief that they "can" produce given levels of attainment), have sufficient "reasons" to lead, become "energized" by being proactive, and are focused on creativity and innovation (Bandura, 1997; Chiu et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2010; Sloane & Sloane, 2017).

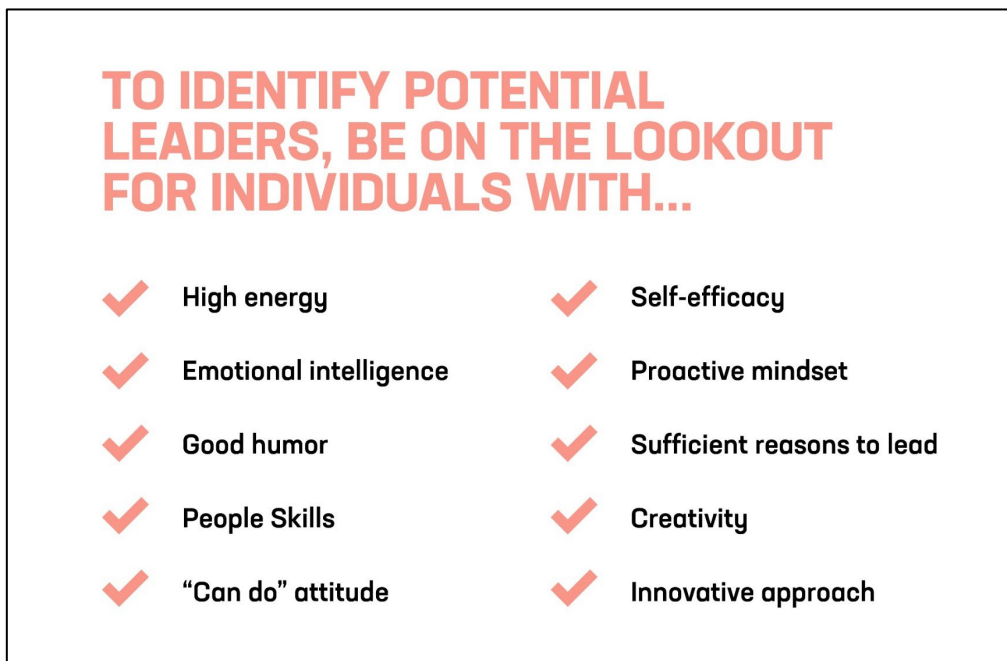


Figure 3. Identifying potential leaders

### ***Cultivating Lateral Leaders***

Once those with leadership potential are identified, administrators must "take a chance

on them" by providing opportunities to lead and giving them the tools, support, and time to fulfill their new roles. This may be "challenging for libraries that follow the higher education model of fixed appointments and long-tenured staff ... [and do] not have the flexibility to create new or short-term positions" (Bugg, 2016, p. 493).

Library administrators may find it useful to first identify "organization-specific leadership competencies" for new and emerging lateral leaders (Bugg, 2016, p. 429). Commonly listed attributes for leadership include "flexibility, adaptability, willingness to accept and manage change; visionary, strategic planning, and resource management; cultural competence; advocacy, ability to set priorities, manage time, and multi-task; innovation and collaboration; self-awareness, self-knowledge, and emotional intelligence; decision-making and problem-solving ability; understanding of library trends; influence" (Bugg, 2016, p. 492). Rosen (2017) also emphasizes that developing leadership talent should focus on "enhancing people's ability to influence, persuade, and elicit constructive contributions from others at all levels ... plan interactions more carefully, bring others into the problem-solving process, and be more nimble in real-time situations" (para. 8).

With these competencies and skills in mind, organizations can then help new and emerging lateral leaders develop or hone their skills through managerial interventions, leadership development programs, and training. New and emerging lateral leaders may further develop their skills through opportunities to "try on" or practice leading in low-risk situations. A few low-risk lateral leadership opportunities include: (1) assigning individuals to take on temporary or interim coordinator roles, (2) partnering with other libraries to provide short-term leadership opportunities, (3) encouraging employees to participate in professional association committees and subcommittees with yearly changeovers of leadership, and (4) encouraging your

library's "committee chair regulars" (Croxton et al., 2021, p. 23) to take a back seat/support role, in order to cultivate a new generation of leaders.

### *Cultivating yourself as a leader*

While leadership can be cultivated in others, individual employees can also cultivate themselves to become leaders. New or emerging lateral leaders may be motivated by the chance to cultivate their leadership skills in order to demonstrate their talent to library administration and colleagues, have more input on the direction of the library, contribute to the organization in new and meaningful ways, or develop their own leadership styles (Hoffman & Barker, 2022; Irwin & deVries, 2019; Kakar, 2017).

An aspiring leader is encouraged to outline and implement a plan with their supervisor for their leadership growth and career trajectory. Such a plan is likely to include identifying and participating in professional development leadership training and may also include identifying and working with a mentor who is in a more senior role. Many individuals find it helpful to create or participate in informal cohorts or communities of practice, in which individuals with common goals and similar interests learn through interaction with each other and become better equipped to achieve their goals (Creelman, 2016; Parker et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998). Further, Hersh (2018) highlights the importance of building networks and relationships, setting aside specific time to work on building influence, being helpful when asked, and volunteering to take on projects or roles that get you noticed.

Being a "joiner" can be a valuable and effective first step in cultivating oneself as a leader. An organization that empowers and values lateral leaders must have a culture in which initiative is encouraged, acknowledged, and honored. As a joiner, employees have the opportunity to find their voices, make meaningful contributions to the organization beyond their daily functions, and develop the self-confidence to move

from joiner to initiator and leader. A wonderful byproduct of creating opportunities for oneself to lead or being placed with the trust of others to lead is heightened self-respect and gaining the respect of others. While the desire and initiative to be a "joiner" must come from within, encouraging others to challenge their working assumptions about how things are done may be useful. In their book, *Getting it Done When You're Not the Boss*, Fisher and Sharp (2004) provide a useful comparative outline of some "widely held assumptions" and "different assumptions you can adopt"; a few items from this outline that are particularly relevant to the present discussion are outlined in Table 1 (p. 199).

Table 1. Working Assumptions

<b>We Choose our Working Assumptions Which Ones Should You Choose?</b>		
<b>Widely Held Assumptions</b>		<b>Different Assumptions You Can Adopt</b>
Problems are someone else's fault.	→	Perhaps I can make a difference.
I don't have to get involved.	→	The more involved I become, the fuller a life I lead.
I can get away with looking the other way.	→	I can choose to help.
Some of these ideas are useless.	→	I can adapt some of these ideas and find them useful.
Adapted from Fisher & Sharp, 2004, p. 199		

Management and leadership are not one-in-the-same, nor does one always lead to the other. Nayar (2013) explains that "influence and inspiration separate leaders from managers, not power and control." Thus, individuals can choose to be leaders, even if they are not in positions with managerial responsibilities.

### **Lateral Leadership in Action**

*Becky Croxton, Head of Strategic Analytics & Special Projects*

*In my current job as Head of Strategic Analytics & Special Projects, I have two direct reports. Our team is very small; we largely consider ourselves to be independent contributors, spending most of our time managing projects. After serving in my role for about six months, our library dean asked me to chair the Website Advisory Group. This is a large committee of about 20 library employees*

*charged with overseeing the library website. At the time, I wasn't a member of the committee, had only dropped into one meeting previously out of curiosity, am not a web designer, and had no experience with marketing or communications. The committee had been struggling; there was an underlying sentiment that the site needed major change. However, the group seemed to be stuck, meetings were often contentious and fraught with emotion, and members couldn't agree on a way forward.*

*When the Dean asked me to step in as chair, I was wary. Who was I to lead this group? Despite my nerves, I accepted the challenge. Now, three years later, I've realized that leading is less about project and people management and more about inspiring, steering change, and enabling others to contribute in meaningful ways. A fully-redesigned website is now in place, the committee is running smoothly, and progress towards maintaining and continuously improving our website is proceeding democratically and efficiently. I developed invaluable confidence and leadership skills through (1) rebuilding the committee with equitable representation across all units of the library, (2) letting others help share the load by forming short-term working groups with cross-unit collaborations, (3) focusing discussions with a strategic mindset, (4) using data to drive decision making, and (5) creating a democratic decision-making process that has helped minimize emotion and territorialism. Through all of this, I learned that stepping up to the plate and taking a risk by saying "yes" was valuable not only for my own personal and professional growth but also for the library.*

### ***Supporting lateral leaders***

With the addition of new lateral leadership roles, there are potential drawbacks and risks that are often underestimated by organizations. Feelings of frustration, overwhelm, stress, and mental and physical fatigue may arise, particularly when there are new responsibilities combined with low decision-making authority, an elevated workload without sufficient resources, less time to devote to one's own formal duties, and challenges gaining buy-in and follow-through from individuals in a group without formal authority (Chiu et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Hoffman & Barker, 2022; Koopman et al., 2016).

To mitigate these risks, library administrators are encouraged to proactively support new lateral leaders by:



- providing financial support and time to participate in leadership development opportunities;
- ensuring necessary resources are in place to successfully fulfill leadership responsibilities;
- connecting lateral leaders with a mentor who will guide them to cross-training (Chiu et al., 2021; Roquet, 2020);
- assigning leadership opportunities that are appropriate for their level of confidence and skill;
- allowing lateral leaders decision-making autonomy and the "freedom to experiment and not be tied down by creativity-hobbling rules and regulations" (Lubans, 2009, p. 90); and
- educating and communicating with employees about what it means to be a good follower (Carsten et al., 2018).

If the new lateral leadership responsibilities are a significant change from an employee's regular workload and level of responsibility, the dean, associate dean, or director might consider reducing other workload responsibilities, recognizing special contributions, changing a formal job title that reflects additional responsibilities, or providing additional financial compensation.

"Effective mentoring is essential to the growth and success of librarianship in all types of librar[ies]" (Freedman, 2009, p. 171). Freedman (2009) explains that there are two categories of mentoring: (1) career mentoring, which describes "specific mentor behavior supportive of a mentee's success" and (2) psychosocial mentoring, which refers to the "personal aspect of a relationship related to supporting a protégé's professional identity and sense of confidence" (p. 173). Career mentoring is well documented in leadership literature as being beneficial for both organizations and

employees as it relates to succession planning, employee retention, organizational learning, career growth, employee satisfaction, and more (Bugg, 2016; Creelman, 2016; Freedman, 2009; Parker et al., 2010). While both types of mentoring are likely to be beneficial, psychosocial mentoring may be particularly impactful for new lateral leaders as they learn to navigate through administrative challenges and lead their peers when they do not have positional authority.

### **Lateral Leadership in Action -- Mentoring**

*Sherri Saines, Subject Librarian, Mentee*

*Becky Croxton, Head of Strategic Analytics & Special Projects, Mentee*

*Anne Cooper Moore, Library Dean, Mentor*

*Saines: Dean Moore has been my ALA-LLAMA mentor for over five years. During a period of upheaval in my own organization, she helped me see the wider picture, take risks, and learn and prepare for new roles. In the process we became friends and mutual support for one another. That experience proved so formative that I have since taken on two mentees through CORE and lead a national co-mentoring group. The benefits of this lateral leadership work on my part spill into my home organization in the form of new ideas, shared experience and advice, and my own (supported) bravery. The chain of mentoring powers more than one's own library.*

*Croxton: In addition to her role as my direct supervisor, Dean Moore also provides ongoing mentorship to me. Through her encouragement to take on new leadership opportunities at the professional association level, I have become heavily involved in participating and leading several ACRL Value of Academic Library related initiatives that have been extremely rewarding. These new opportunities have not only helped me build confidence and leadership skills, but also enabled me to build my own community of practice and support among like-minded peers who often face similar leadership challenges. Dean Moore not only supports my career development, but also provides a great deal of psychosocial mentorship as I have learned to navigate challenging lateral leadership situations both in my own library work and across the profession.*

*Moore: I have found it incredibly rewarding to mentor and co-support Sherri. When we discuss her concerns, I see ways to improve my relationship with Becky and others. I gain insights into my own leadership and think of ways to help others in my library. It is amazing how spending time in reflection on leadership, your own or others, broadens your own perspective. Mentoring is a mutually-rewarding activity that pays dividends to both parties. Libraries need active mentoring programs within their organization, but individuals at all stages of their careers benefit from mentoring relationships.*

Listening, communicating, and mentoring at a high level is challenging and time-consuming. It is remarkably difficult to remain unselfish and organized. Lateral leaders must also be gentle with themselves by not imposing harsh self-judgements, taking time to reflect and recharge, and praising their own efforts if needed. Other forms of self-care are recommended, but should not be taken to mean the individual is expected to win out, like Superwoman, in systems of inequity or oppression (Ewen, 2022).

### **Techniques for working thoughtfully with teams**

Lateral leaders aren't usually bosses, so many levers of power are not available to them. Among peers, a lateral leader's most important tools are building trust, communicating effectively, and listening closely. While it may appear that the lateral leader herein described does these actions naturally, they are skills that can be learned and improved. The intention here is to highlight these three basics as encompassing most of what the lateral leader must do well.

#### ***Building trust***

Trust may arise without effort, but more commonly it must be purposefully constructed. In the *Harvard Business Review*, Zak (2017) reports on research that shows brain chemistry reacts to situations of trust in ways that build productivity. This is radically important: humans do better work in situations of trust. The Google Aristotle Study (2015) also supports this concept; the number one characteristic shared by highly productive teams was “psychological safety.”

The paradox, of course, is that Google's intense data collection and number crunching have led it to the same conclusions that good managers have always

known. In the best teams, members listen to one another and show sensitivity to feelings and needs” (Duhigg, 2016, p. 8).

Leaders build trust by modeling authenticity and vulnerability among the team members (Creelman, 2016). Many other specific tactics are described in the literature. For example, Chad Littlefield of weand.me (2020, 2021) offers practical techniques for this important step in team building. He uses the tagline “Connection before Content” to describe this approach. His battery of connection tools includes discussion starters and other interactive experiences that follow suggestions backed by the literature. Littlefield suggests these experiences should be “connected to the purpose” of the group, broadly defined, making the reason for taking the time more obvious to the skeptical.

### ***High level communication***

In leading teams and groups, good communication saturated across the organization can drive success (Klein, et al., 2009). Deliberate and careful communication techniques address employees’ needs to belong and work toward a common mission.

In their article in *Informing Science*, Morgan and her team report that “communication and informal meetings were associated with increased team satisfaction and increased research productivity” (2021, p. 84). This is just one illustration of the broad literature that ties teambuilding and open communication to outcomes, but is particularly salient because Morgan’s team studied groups of science researchers in academia rather than student or business groups. Their research emphasizes the effectiveness of communication that furthers goal and role clarity, efficient formal meetings, shared leadership, and even social meetings.

Excellent communication strategies go beyond meeting agendas and task lists. Asking one another questions that push into growth and reflection such as, “Why did

you succeed and what did you learn? How will you apply that in our next project?” encourage experimentation – and even productive failure (Creelman, 2016).

With the teams’ goals in mind, informal leaders can study the organizational chart and draw lines from the team, their supervisors, their supervisor’s supervisors, and all the stakeholders. Which connections should be kept, strengthened, or created? Can the group talk openly about power, how it moves through the organization, how it impacts the group’s projects? Learning about and leveraging power structures may bring possibilities for action with even higher impact to light.

Once again, communication creates or strengthens these relationships. Meetings, followed by summarizing emails or meeting notes with clear action items, document and clarify interpersonal connections. The careful gathering of stakeholders, accounting, and tracking, takes more time; the organization may not be willing to allow for this task. Any leader might recognize the signs that the team’s deadline is too tight or the group too fleeting to make the investment in good, strong relationships.

### **Lateral Leadership in Action**

*Sherri Saines, Subject Librarian*

*I accepted the challenge of being the Interim Coordinator of Subject Librarians, an experimental position in our first reorganization. The work of coordinator had been handled at the Assistant Dean level, and it seemed logical to allow the Subject Librarians to work more like a team with shared problems.*

*My first step in gathering this dispersed group was to do an Appreciative Inquiry interview with each librarian. From these conversations, I learned immediately that I could not take for granted that team members approach work or problem solving similarly. Despite my ideas about what should happen, what seemed like obvious solutions, even what felt vital and important, others did not agree with me.*

*It was important, then, to discover consensus on the mission of the group on a deep level. We spent many months using team building techniques to attempt to suss out our own definition of the work of subject librarians and a brief vision statement. The listening and norming process could not be skipped.*

*I felt that the team was divided on every question of importance, so I took even more time for discussion, listened harder, allowed more iterations of ideas, offered more channels for comment, and waited for more consensus to arise until something evolved which was new and effective. I felt strongly that approaching discussion as a facilitator rather than coming in with set answers allowed the team to find a better answer. As with every move in this group, this time-taking and team building was appreciated by some and despised by others. When we finally voted in the mission and definition statements, I felt we had accomplished something important. As a lateral leader, lacking the power to force others to behave in certain ways, this facilitator-based approach remains the best tool.*

*Even then, in this experience, no cohesion emerged and after my tenure was up the document we created didn't significantly impact our day to day work. I saw that the leader must have support from above to invest the time it would take to make deeper changes. I determined I did not have administrative support to continue my collaborative approach and so I neither pushed for more time nor applied for the permanent position.*

### ***Listening and bridge building***

The lateral leader helps others learn to listen with deep respect, both individually and in the group. They create this norm and insist on its use. Opting out of the discussion because members disagree is not a path forward. Not addressing conflict debilitates a team. This is further explored in Lencioni (2002),

By building trust, a team makes conflict possible because team members do not hesitate to engage in passionate and sometimes emotional debate, knowing that they will not be punished for saying something that might otherwise be interpreted as destructive or critical” (Chapter4, 44.2.1).

People must be able to disagree if they are to address root causes and real solutions.

Therefore, the group must trust each other enough, and communicate openly enough, to fight fair and avoid groupthink.

Great divides sometimes exist in the team one is trying to coalesce. The most common advice for this difficulty is even deeper listening. It is possible, but still difficult, to find a compromise position if people can approach resolving conflict with these attitudes: genuine humility, compassion, withholding judgment; considering what

and how more than why; repeating what is heard; asking for clarification; talking less; and giving it more time. Repetitive short forays into disputed territory may yield a truce in the long run, rather than pushing or insisting on resolution in the moment (Lewandowsky, 2020; Leary, 2017; Leary, 2022).

### ***Listening as a diversity tool***

Listening thoroughly and deeply is also vital for diversity initiatives. Anton Treuer, (2020) a Native American activist, puts it this way: “If you can see that your liberation is tied up in my liberation, let’s begin.” That is, if people can bravely take the time and regard to engage with others who think differently, or approach problems from a different perspective, both sides may end up freeing themselves from siloed thinking.

That such deep listening is a learnable skill with positive effects on both workers and leaders is intuitive, and is born out in research. Landry-Meyer (2023) tested “cultural cognizant listening” and determined that listening skill training has a positive effect on respectful conversations in class. Helgesen calls this skill set “advanced listening,” one of three essential inclusive practices (2021). The IMLS Empathy Project (2020) is another training tool for learning to respond to challenges with more empathy. Lateral leaders can husband listening as a tool for improved group dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

The authors applied their varied experience as specialists and generalists over the course of their careers and benefitted from mentoring, coaching, and grasping at opportunities to build their skills as lateral leaders. Most of the work in libraries is not about finding the one right way to do something; it is about developing a viable and optimal way forward based on the perspectives of the people at the table, making the decision, and moving ahead in unity. Lateral leaders from across the organization apply a variety of

fundamental communication, people, organization, meeting, and project management skills to facilitate groups to find and achieve shared goals. While lateral leaders rise because they have the courage to try something new, they need mentoring to help them hone their leadership skills. Deans, directors, associate deans, and department or unit managers should be on the lookout for employees who demonstrate some of the skills of a leader and mentor them to try out lateral leadership alone or in a team. Building a lateral leadership program in your library is a key to successful succession planning.

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