



WHITE PAPER

Academic Libraries and Leadership Skills

ADVANCING
DISCOVERY

Contributors

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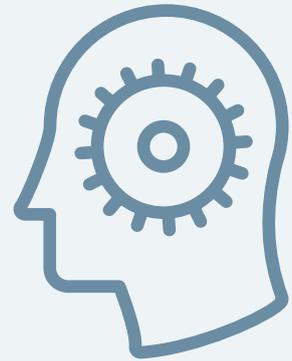
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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are under pressure. Not only are they operating in a rapidly changing digital environment, but they are also facing major challenges in terms of resources. Added to that, the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have made their lives even more difficult. The question now is how do they best steer a course through these challenging times, and what do they need to do this?

The answer is, of course, leadership. Libraries cannot implement the changes necessary to continue the vital work they do throughout digital transformation without strong leadership, and this has now become a significant issue. According to [Academic library leadership](#) in the dawn of the new millennium, it was found that the development of library leadership skills has been a comparatively neglected area in the library profession historically, especially for junior and mid-career library professionals.

Bringing together librarians and leadership experts, this paper aims to address the issue of leadership through change, and to provide support and practical advice for librarians.

Digital transformation and the challenges facing libraries

Librarians' roles are changing. Digital transformation has brought with it a raft of new skills and competencies for libraries. Beyond the shift from physical material to electronic resources, further-reaching changes affect the daily working lives of librarians, who are called upon to provide services more relevant to today's academic library.

Change is challenging and disruptive, at every level of the library. And the barriers to change are people. [Experiential avoidance](#) may work in the short term but doesn't in the long term. It's a major barrier to change, and to overcome this, we need to help people build the capacity to get out of their comfort zones, to build psychological flexibility.

*The brutal fact is that about **70%** of all change initiatives fail.*

**Nohira and Beer,
Harvard Business
Review**



TIP

Management in Publishing's practical resistance busters:

- Have a transparent process
- Keep lines of communication open
- Keep people informed, give them time to absorb it
- Look and listen
- Encourage sceptics to voice their concerns
- Provide support
- Find change champions, and be one



Perceptions of the library

Historically there have been long-standing issues with perceptions of the academic library. It's not uncommon for faculty to see the library as a service, and not of equal value to the institution. Where we see this occur, it can become all-pervasive, from students though to university administration.

"Institutional support is essential, yet it's the exception to the rule." **Shin Freedman**

Since libraries are competing with faculty for shrinking budgets, it's imperative that they project a strong image, demonstrating their impact and value throughout the institution. This can be done by marketing their services well, and embedding themselves further in the research process. Most of all, though, it requires a strong library leader to project a strong, positive image. According to Jane Harvell, there's also an endemic perception of women in the industry.

Digital evolution requires cultural evolution

"Culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin." **Edgar Schein**

Digital transformation involves far-reaching technological changes in academic libraries. But digital innovations are more of a human science than computer science, so investment in necessary cultural changes are crucial.

"Often the library is culturally not understood – it's seen as an array of services and support, in an island. Only if the library is understood culturally can it then share and request." **Shin Freedman**

TIP

"Tapping into scholarship, research and research support would be a great way to change perceptions of the library and librarians."
Shin Freedman

■ *"For libraries to see themselves as second class citizens is a classic red flag. A good leader will change this."* **Nancy Roberts**

"There's an ingrained perception in a predominantly female profession within a predominantly male higher education profession of subservience, and a lack of ambition. It troubles me that I hear "You're not like other librarians" as it means there's a perception of the profession at play."
Shin Freedman



What does it take to be a good leader through change?

"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

Tolstoy

Librarians are not natural leaders...

Some might say that librarians are drawn to the profession because it's knowledge-based, not people-facing. Whilst that may be so in some cases, there's no reason why even more introverted employees can't take on new skills.

Leadership is a set of skills and competencies, not innate characteristics, and these can be learned. These are competencies that any employee can have, such as emotional intelligence, negotiating and influencing skills, and a wide vision of the industry.

Attributes of a good leader

Not so long ago, there was a strict hierarchy in most organisations. Now, it's widely acknowledged that although hierarchical leaders can set a direction, they need to take advantage of other people's strengths as well.

In an [ACRL study](#), common leadership themes cited positively by librarians are: inter- and intrapersonal skills, strong communicator, change agent, and leading with vision. In addition, it was felt that you can't lead unless you're self-aware and have an understanding of your own emotions, and your situation within the organisation. Then, by understanding others' perspectives as well, you can manage how to come across as a leader.

The 21st century leader is not position-based, but more to do with influencing and managing relationships – something that women are particularly suited to, says Duncan Enright. This, according to Duncan Enright, is something librarians do as part of their job but don't recognise it for what it is.

"Being good with books isn't the same as being good with people." **Greg Sheaf**

For a leader to achieve meaningful change, there are two key elements to success:

- Clarity on the intended outcome. Any change project is constantly evolving, be that costs, staffing levels, so it's vital to be clear about your goals.
- Understanding of the barriers you will face – which is, ultimately, people.

"The crucial thing is to build an understanding of the need for change, and a sense of urgency, as well as leaving experts to get on with the bits they know most about. If people see the risks of not changing, then you can make the rest happen."

Nancy Roberts

Stakeholder mapping

Nancy Roberts advocates stakeholder mapping, to map what everyone's power and influence in change would be. Don't neglect less vocal parts of your organisation – faculty tend to be vocal but you need the support of your technology department too, and they could get lost in the noise. Speak to them all, then step back, to assess who needs to be on board with change, and how you can build alliances with them.

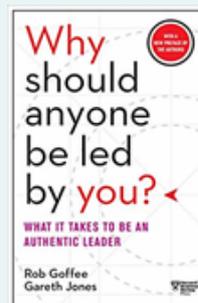
TIP

Management versus Leadership



- Leadership is setting up a vision of what needs to be done and why
- Management is delivering the change in practice

TIP



Don't assume that you're the boss and that others will follow you - you have to earn their trust. Nancy Roberts recommends Goffee and Jones' *Why Should Anyone be Led by You?* which argues that effective leaders are authentic, and skilled at being themselves, in context

■ *"A growth mindset is essential for library leaders – without this, change and innovation cannot happen. You need risk-taking, and to be courageous."* **Shin Freedman**

Leadership theories for Academic Libraries

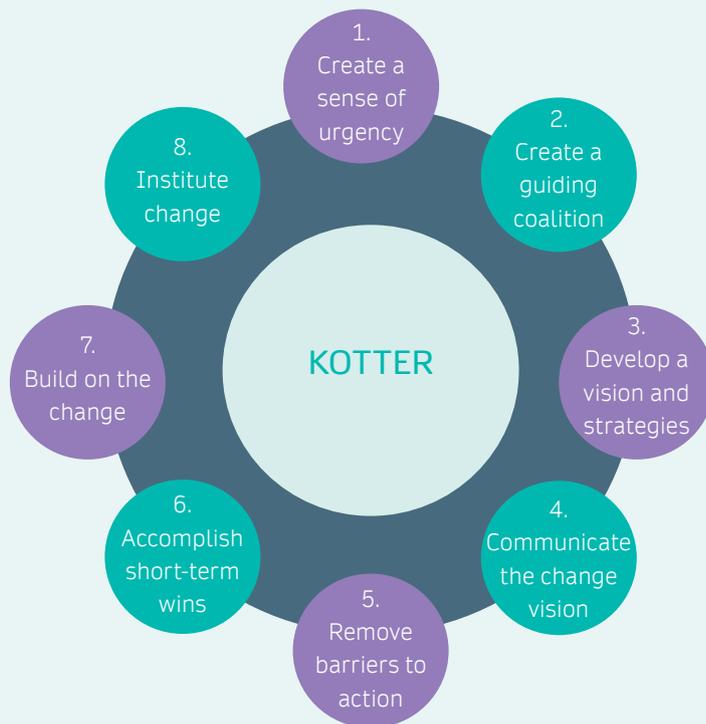


There are many different leadership theories, and it's a question of picking one method that's appropriate to the context; in this case libraries. Well-established and widely-used leadership methods include building an [Agile](#) organisation, [Kotter's](#) eight-step theory, and [Lewin's](#) three-stage theory of change: unfreezing, movement, and refreezing.

Kotter's Change Management Theory

Nancy Roberts is CEO of [Management in Publishing](#), advising organisations on how to achieve meaningful change. In Nancy's view, Kotter is most appropriate for academic libraries.

Theories



Kotter is the definitive change management theory, but it does require extremely strong leadership commitment. It's less about how to do it, and more about people – emotional connection and buy-in. There's strong emphasis on building acceptance of the change before making the change. And you do need first to adapt it to the circumstances. The principles are sound, but you need to figure out how to split resources around these.

Transpersonal Leadership

Duncan Enright is a Director of [Leadershape Global](#), delivering leadership programmes around Transpersonal Leadership – operating beyond the ego. Rather than focus on skills, they aim to discover team members' strengths and weaknesses, and their behaviour. By surfacing the culture of the team in this way, it's possible to lead through using emotional intelligence, assessing your own needs and thoughts, and building on this to relate to others' needs.

"Transpersonal Leadership is based on emotional intelligence and ethical practices, something that is very relevant to libraries."

The Four-Frame Model, and LMX

Shin Freedman is Head of Scholarly Resources & Collections for the Whittemore Library at Framingham State University (FSU) in Massachusetts. She is the author of

[Becoming a Library Leader: Seven Stages of Leadership Development for Academic Librarians](#). Shin likes two newer leadership models which give you more perspectives and tools: The Four-Frame Model and Leader Member Exchange Theory (LMX). The Four-Frame Model opened her eyes because leadership challenges aren't all in the same area, so they should be viewed through different "lenses": structural, human resources, political and symbolic. LMX theory emphasises the crucial fact that leadership is all about relationships, and that leaders need to attract followers.

Preparing Librarians for Leadership

It's clearly established that leaders can come from anywhere within a team, not just from the top. Leadership can be learned, by anyone, but there's a widespread lack of opportunities for librarians to do so.



"Leadership training is interesting for anyone - you don't have to be a leader to find it valuable. If you're not at the top, you're managing upwards, and if you understand why people make decisions, it makes the decision easier to understand." **Jane Harvell**

What training is available?

Courses are commonly available only to senior management, such as Harvard's [Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians](#). Many leadership courses do not focus on change, such as the ALA's [library leadership training resources](#). [Leading Libraries](#) is SCOUNL's directory of leadership courses for libraries. It includes a list of leadership courses relevant for libraries. They also have a [mentoring scheme](#), for emerging and newly-appointed leaders. Graduate courses generally do not devote much time to developing leadership skills, and modules specific to leadership are often elective, not mandatory.

"Leadership training is essential, and there's not enough emphasis on this. It's not true that leaders are born – in my experience, good learning makes better leaders. They learn through mentors or role models, on a formal or informal basis. Their surroundings, and who they associate with, is very important." **Shin Freedman**

"Training for all library staff is essential, and I fight for the budget to enable this to happen. There are courses run by institutional organisations, but the onus is essentially on libraries to release people to do the training." **Jane Harvell**

There's a definite lack of opportunity for librarians at all levels to learn leadership skills. And as Shin Freedman points out, now, with COVID, many good people have retired, and there's a big hole in the leadership area. There's no succession planning – who's going to fill in when they've gone?

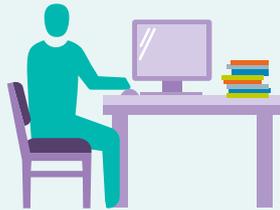
"You form your leadership skills by chance generally. Day courses now and then are no use." **Greg Sheaf**



Case Studies

The Middle Manager

Things are increasingly challenging – we need to fight battles for budget and staff. I have to advocate to get things done, manage upwards as well as down, persuading my seniors that something is the best way forward. It's to do with having the knowledge to do something, then you need the soft skills to persuade someone to do it. There's a chain reaction, with each person persuading the next rung up – leadership comes from all rungs of the ladder.



What does leadership mean? It means advocacy most of all, and the ability to influence others. You need a shared understanding of the library's purpose. I have great respect for the leadership of TCD, who have kept back the tide of ever decreasing budgets. Since COVID, we've seen a flip back to where the people who know the most about something are respected, where expertise is valued and recognised, enabling people to lead in their areas. Consult widely, act decisively, and acknowledge other points of view – that's good leadership and makes a team cohesive.

You form your leadership skills by chance generally. Day courses now and then are no use. Part of the training we don't have is communication, which is crucial in selling what you do to gain institutional support. Who makes the best argument wins. PR, and how to present yourself, is crucial, as it's all about perceptions of you and of your profession.

Greg Sheaf, Assistant Librarian, Trinity College Dublin

The Librarianship Student

I took one course with an explicit emphasis on leadership, but it was an elective, not a required class. We went over topics such as maintaining a budget, going after grant funding, the hiring process, and how to delegate tasks. Group activities involved solving typical workplace problems.

The most valuable thing I learned was that not everyone is a natural-born leader. There are multiple types of effective employees who approach problems and interact with others differently. We explored leadership ability, illustrated through the [CliftonStrengths assessment](#), which we took at the beginning of the course. We were taught that people with different leadership talents can be placed in different areas of a library. And when libraries make decisions or formulate plans, the difference in personalities and skills can be an asset in the group decision-making process.

In terms of leadership training opportunities, it seems that until a librarian has been in the job for long enough to qualify for programmes like the [ALA's](#), they pretty much rely on their on-the-job training and the policies of the library that they work for.

Laura Pennacchi, Graduate in Library & Information Science, University of Illinois

The Library Director

I am an instinctive, consultative leader, who watches people. I sense-check decisions with my team, both formally and informally, engaging with people when I make changes. It's about bringing people together and working as one team. On a director level, there are all sorts of different skillsets – I learn from other directors and goes to them for advice, as they do me.

When I came into this role, I restructured, redefining roles and responsibilities. I created two Associate Directors with overlapping responsibilities to lead strategically across the library. It was a cultural change, empowering people to do what they're good at, and trimming at the strategic level.

I am aware of the need to sometimes change my own leadership style to take a more directional approach to ensure the instructions are clear and consistent – this has been especially important during the past 18 months of the pandemic.

You're always learning as a leader. You learn from others and how they're dealing with their work. Good leadership means communication, offering reassurance and clarity above all, then you gain people's trust and are seen as a leader. There's a lot of noise in institutions around change right now, so you need to distil this and deliver to all staff in an individual way what's important for them.



**Jane Harvell – Library Director,
University of Sussex**



IN CONCLUSION



Leading through digital transformation is a huge challenge for academic libraries, and until now has been a much-neglected area. We have put together here resources and narrative from experts to help libraries develop their leadership skills and put theory into practice, and navigate their way successfully through change.

More and better thought-out training in leadership skills is needed to implement the changes necessary for growth. Training throughout the library team, not just at the top, is necessary, and must be appropriate to the individual. An upskilled library team can competently change negative perceptions of the library and transform their ability to win budget and resources.

Training requires significant time and investment, which may be difficult in these challenging times, but it's clearly unavoidable for the successful future functioning of the library. And above all, always bear in mind the core purpose of the library, which many might say is to provide access to high quality information and excellent services, in order to advance learning and research.

Special Thanks

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For more news and views from Springer Nature and the library community sign-up for **Librarian Alerts** at [springernature.com alerts](https://springernature.com/alerts)

TIP

"What is the library for in a modern institution? By going back to the purpose of the library, by thinking about why you're there, you discover what's important in getting where you need to be."

Duncan Enright