# Growing Your Own: Developing Leaders through Succession Planning

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## INTRODUCTION

Few professions have spent as much time contemplating their present and future as have academic librarians. Conspicuous by its absence until recently has been any systematic discussion of leadership, and more specifically the process of succession planning. In this paper I will argue that neglect of succession planning reflects a series of widespread assumptions which, even if once valid, can no longer inform strategic planning for academic libraries. Although it is clear that there are risks attached to succession planning, the experience of Cambridge University Library highlights both the need for such an exercise and the advantages that it can bring to the profession of academic librarianship as a whole.

## DEFINING LEADERSHIP

"Before discussing the significance of leadership in the context of the academic library it is important to define the nature of leadership and to distinguish between leading and managing. These two terms are often used interchangeably, suggesting that they are simply two aspects of the same activity"(Renaud & Murray, 2003). Warren G. Bennis, author of many books on leadership, and regarded by many as the 'Dean of Leadership Experts', has developed many classic differentiations between leadership and management, including "A good manager does things right. A leader does the right things"(Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997). According to Bennis, management has to do with efficiency, with a focus on systems and structure - making things run properly. Leadership in contrast, is concerned with identity, with a focus on people - why we are here; what our business is; what our destination, goals and missions are.

Academic libraries require strong leadership in order to thrive in this era of constant change. The challenge lies in identifying the key elements that must be present in order for future leaders to be developed. However, when describing these elements, we need to move beyond the assumption that "leaders are born, not made". Being born with certain leadership characteristics and skills is a great advantage, but leaders also can be 'made' and everyone can improve their abilities through training, challenging assignments and experiences that push them to develop new skills. The experience of private sector organisations clearly demonstrates this. Best-practice companies such as Shell International and Johnson & Johnson "choose an action-oriented, ongoing learning process closely linked to the strategic needs of the business". They recognise that leaders who keep learning may be the ultimate source of sustainable competitive advantage (Fulmer, Gibbs & Goldsmith, 2000).

Leadership can be exercised at all levels within an organisation, but the relative lack of attention paid to it in academic librarianship relates at least in part to the absence of formal performance measures comparable to those in the private sector. "Management literature points again and again to the imperatives of competitive advantage, measurable in financial terms, as a justification for a corporate focus on identifying and developing leaders" (Renaud & Murray, 2003). Although libraries measure many activities, the types of clear performance measures that help to highlight effective individual performance within the university library are minimal. The result is that judgements about individual librarians have tended to become subjective and have drawn upon the perceptions of supervisors and peers.

## WHY WE NEED TO WORRY ABOUT LEADERSHIP

It is unsurprising that in recent years academic libraries across the world have begun to address issues of leadership more systematically. Many of these institutions have few, if any, internal staff ready to assume senior positions. Institutions are also experiencing problems recruiting externally at senior level and the recruitment processes for some posts of university librarians and senior managers have often taken months and even years. In some cases the recruitment process has been abandoned altogether due to a lack of

suitable candidates and this has led to some university libraries having to manage around a vacancy on an indefinite basis.

While most libraries will typically face the need for more leaders during the next ten years an increasing number will face an unusually large gap in leadership talent caused by several key staff leaving senior management positions through retirement of the 'baby boom' generation.   In addition, because other libraries will also be feeling the impact of this leadership shortfall, they will be intensifying their recruitment efforts, meaning that many libraries will be in fierce competition with each other when trying to attract the best candidates from a dwindling group.

**WHY HAS IT BECOME DIFFICULT TO FILL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS?**

As running libraries becomes more complex, the standard for all senior management competencies (behaviour, knowledge, motivations) has grown because posts have become more challenging. In a time when the phrase "the only constant is change" has reached the point of being a cliché, librarians must be visionary individuals be adept at driving near-constant change, handle vast ambiguities and produce rapid results with less resources than ever. The scale of these challenges means that the depth and range of skills continues to grow.

However, as library staff structures have become flatter in recent years, many traditional development positions that led to top leadership roles such as "Deputy" have been eliminated. In these flattened organisations the competencies developed by individuals tends to be narrower. Indeed the lack of suitable candidates with the requisite generic skills for heads of library service posts was highlighted in 2002 in a UK published research report as result of the project HIMMS - Hybrid Information Management: Skills for Senior Staff (Abbott, 2003).

A related problem is that many potential candidates lack the motivation to step up to the next level. Increasingly middle managers are happy to avoid the long hours, outside commitments and additional responsibilities that have become part of life for those at senior levels.  Younger members of the workforce are also bringing a different work ethic to the job, one that also could become a factor in the leadership shortfall. They expect their employer to sell the library's vision, to provide exciting work challenges which answer their 'WIIFM' (What's in it for me) expectations and if they don't find this, then they resign. This generation X, as they are often called, have less organizational commitment than their older counterparts, are often more concerned with work-life balance and value experiencing life even if there are economic consequences. For many, responsibilities of senior management hold no appeal (Byham, Smith & Paese, 2002).

Whilst the above factors appear to make a strong case for systematic succession planning within academic libraries, there remain legitimate grounds for questioning the urgency of the need. It would not merely be complacent for institutions to reassure themselves with the thought that there remains a considerable talent available within the academic library profession. Moreover, badly managed library succession planning programmes could generate alternative problems. There is a real risk of libraries limiting their leadership recruitment to people from their own institutions, thereby missing out on external talent. Conversely, the expectations of internal staff could be raised to an unrealistic level, with a negative effect on the motivation of staff who do not achieve promotion. I would argue however that the genuine dangers of ineffective succession planning are arguments not for abandoning the enterprise but rather for ensuring that it is properly managed, and consistently informed by its strategic priorities. The foremost of these priorities is to balance a healthy turnover of staff - critical to avoid institutional stagnation - with a planned development of internal leadership potential. Recent experience of recruiting senior academic library staff in the UK clearly demonstrates the necessity of the latter exercise if libraries are to ensure the expeditious and effective filling of leadership vacancies. It has also shown that talent will not simply 'rise to the top' in the absence of systematic institutional leadership development programmes. The current generation of leading academic library directors may indeed have emerged 'naturally', but the changing context of institutional management described above (and in particular the flattening of internal management structures) means that this particular talent production line is unlikely to function as effectively in the future.

Even if the need for succession planning seems clear, it is equally prudent to anticipate the challenges that inevitably accompany cultural change within any institution. Staff treated as high-potential talent may, for example, seek increased remuneration in recognition of their status. Experience from other sectors suggests that the risk of unrealised expectations in relation to salary levels will be more than outweighed by the

benefits such staff perceive when presented with more challenges, experiences, and senior management exposure. In short, their sense that their employers are interested in their long-term retention and development will more than compensate for possible financial dissatisfaction. A more valid concern is that institutional investment in personnel may be wasted if the individuals involved leave for employment elsewhere in the sector. This is to some extent inevitable, but I would argue that we need to take a broader perspective on the need for leadership by balancing short-term investment and the long-term health of academic librarianship as a profession. At a less altruistic level, there is also the real possibility that in due course such individuals may return to their original institution at a more senior level. Finally, there is a need to anticipate that productivity may be adversely affected by an organisation regularly moving people around to different jobs or projects. Any such short-term losses will surely however be more than offset by the gains derived from increased staff motivation, sparked by new challenges, the advantage of having fresh eyes to look at problems, and widening of staff experience in relation to the operational functionality of the organisation.

## 'GROWING YOUR OWN'

As we try to replace leaders from dwindling pools of external and internal candidates the 'grow your own' approach therefore seems an obvious strategy. As noted above, every library needs to recruit external candidates who bring new ideas, special skills, and experience, but equally strong internal bench-strength is required to meet both emergency and long-term leadership at all levels. It also results in management continuity, which can help to ensure the implementation of a consistent strategy and set of values and any planned changes. 'Growing your own' also sends a positive message throughout your workforce. Promoting people from within is good for morale and is consistent with an empowerment philosophy that encourages people to take on responsibility, assume risk, measure outcomes and grow through their achievements. A 'grow your own' strategy is also less expensive, for two reasons. The starting salary for people promoted from within is nearly always lower than that of an external candidate. External appointees also need more time and training to learn a new job, whereas internal appointees can legitimately be expected to 'hit the ground running'. Furthermore, with an internal candidate the employer will have a clearer sense of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as access to more and better data on that person's performance than is normally available with external candidates. Nowadays, most references are largely uninformative due to the impact of Data Protection legislation. Employing the wrong person at senior level is not only costly in financial terms. It is also costly in terms of the negative impact on the morale of staff.

## LEARNING FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The challenge for senior management is to find ways for librarians to grow into leaders in an environment where little is measured that can distinguish individual promise. The experience of the private sector clearly demonstrates the value of sustained, formal, and substantive leadership development training. This training creates spaces for promising individuals to study leadership, meet with successful leaders and consider the career choices that face them. It also signals to the organisation the value and necessity of leadership.

Two institutes which have been recently established in the USA and the UK are endeavouring to provide this type of leadership training. In the USA the Frye Leadership Institute, which was established in 2000, aims to develop creative leaders to guide and transform academic information services for higher education in the twenty-first centuries. In the UK working with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, representatives from SCONUL (Society of College, National & University Libraries), UCISA (Universities & Colleges Information Systems Association), JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and the British Library have pooled their expertise to develop the Future Leaders programme. The aim is to help experienced information and IT professionals develop their leadership potential in preparation for head of service roles. Now in its second year, it brings together over 20 information and IT professionals for an intensive 12 day course, spread over a year, which includes sessions on strategic leadership, organisational change, self-awareness and psychometric assessment. Indeed, when invited to apply for such a programme the organisation is sending a clear message that it supports an employee both professionally and financially. While it will not be possible to measure whether the Future Leaders programme has been a success for a few years yet, it is clear that the onus is on the library profession to present this type of opportunity to help develop the next generation of leaders.

Another way in which libraries can learn from the private sector is to move staff from operational to project-based work. In private sector firms, leaders become visible because performance measures are relatively clear. The measures of profit and loss, customer satisfaction and product innovation highlight high performers and future leaders. In practice it is very difficult to identify leadership potential in the context of day-to-day library operational work. In contrast, project-based work serves to highlight individual contributions, innovation, and leadership potential. If properly framed, a project has objectives, measures of success and a specific beginning and end. It allows the individual assigned to the project to own it in a way impossible in the context of operational activities, and to demonstrate leadership potential.

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY'S SUCCESSION PLANNING INITIATIVE

Drawing on private sector experience Cambridge University Library (CUL) has begun to build a systematic approach to succession planning. Five steps have been identified which we hope will help us develop leaders of the future.

These steps are as follows:

1. Assess the current situation
2. Carry out a risk analysis
3. Identify high-potential individuals
4. Establish a formal mentoring system
5. Create Individual Development Plans

**1. Assess the current situation**

CUL began by assessing the middle-management group. It was noted that since 2000 that there had been 24 professional librarian appointments. From this group a small number of future leaders could be clearly identified, along with others who have been employed at CUL for a longer period of time.  In further examining our pool of appointees we noted that there have been 8 (33%) internal promotions and 4 of these have been from the support staff group who have been promoted where potential has been one of the stronger factors, rather than experience. Each member of staff was clearly able to demonstrate that in the right environment they could deliver results.

Though there is a healthy mix of internal and external appointees, what was quite noticeable was that from the pool of appointees only 25% have been male, while 75% have been female. From this latter group 33% have taken maternity leave since their appointment. It has been argued that women managers or professionals are disadvantaged due to their status as potential or actual mothers. Our experience has been that these working mothers see their jobs as an important part of their identity and if anything they are even more committed to their jobs. Our strategy has been to try to support staff who return from maternity leave as we believe that they have much to offer now and more particularly in the future. For this group we have been able to offer temporary flexible working, temporary part-time working, and the ability to work five days over four. CUL is fortunate because as a large employer it can support female staff in this way

**2. Carry out a risk analysis**

We identified a number of risk areas if we lost key people, but our Senior Management Team stood out as being the most significant risk group. Excluding the Librarian and Deputy, the team consists of six members (5 men and 1 woman) all of whom by 2015, with the exception of one, will have reached or be over the age of 60 and may well have retired. We believe that within our middle-management group that there are current members of staff who have the potential to succeed some of members of senior management. Some have already clearly demonstrated that they could be potential leaders though most clearly need to be exposed to situations/experiences which will allow them to develop further leadership skills. The challenge for CUL is to find ways to provide the right support to prepare these individuals for promotion, while accepting at the same time that there are no guarantees that they will stay. We believe that we must work towards providing key staff with opportunities to 'lead from the middle'. We have an obligation to do more than merely identify present and future work requirements and performance. Some way has to be found to clarify and systematically close, the developmental gap between what they can already do and what they must do to

qualify for advancement. Equally there may well be external candidates who will be better suited to a vacancy and if that is the case then the internal candidate will not be appointed.

### 3. Identify high-potential individuals

This of course is essential to a successful succession management effort. If a library does not have a well-defined profile of what it wants in its future senior leaders, it will be unable effectively to develop people for senior management position. Our profile is based on the qualities of what a successful leader of today must do. S/he must embrace change, think globally, and more often then not, manage more people in less time with fewer resources.

### 4. Establish a formal mentoring system

Most successful people can point to the value of key mentoring relationships over the course of their careers. Mentoring suggests both formal and informal relationships that can help to identify and cultivate leaders. The power of these relationships to shape careers and career choices over time is undisputed. Exactly how to implement such relationships in university libraries is more problematic. Most mentoring relationships appear to have occurred accidentally, as mentor and the mentored meet by chance or on the basis of a shared interest or trait. In an informal arrangement both the mentor and the individual tend to meet on an infrequent basis, and the goals for such meetings are often not spelled out. This means that the success of the relationship cannot be measured. As a result of all this uncertainty few of the people involved are likely to be enthusiastic about taking time out of their busy schedules to participate. CUL has established a formal mentoring programme. Our approach, which is not untypical, is for myself, our HR specialist, and the Senior Management Team, to play matchmaker, pairing up a promising person, be they a current or new member of staff, to someone who is at least one or more levels above that person, but outside the immediate chain of management. Formal mentoring support is available and we have found it to be invaluable as one key assumption of succession planning is that individuals cannot direct their own development for the simple reason that they have no experience based to draw upon. Mentors can provide advice about what people to seek, what work assignments to seek and how to handle the organisation's politics that may help or hinder progress. Those mentored then understand that they are getting special attention from senior management.

### 5. Create Personal Development Plans

The final step in Cambridge's strategy has been to develop individual or 'Personal Development Plans'. Such plans involve considerable commitment as a "one size fits all" development plan does not work. A personal development plan is a tool for helping identify career goals and establish effective strategies for realizing them in the future. It goes a step beyond performance appraisal because it is a systematic comparison of an individual's present abilities and future capabilities. Current abilities can be indicated by competency requirements, work activities on job descriptions and current performance as measured by performance appraisals. The strategy behind a personal development plan should be to narrow the gap between abilities and capabilities, thus providing a mechanism by which an individual can be prepared for future advancement.

There are of course no guarantees of promotion and the member of staff needs to be made aware of this from the beginning. Time affects what kind of, and how many, developmental activities can be carried out. When time is ample then developmental activities can be prioritised, but if it is not, then any such activities that are selected should be absolutely critical to effective job performance.

One straightforward way to determine learning needs is to look at target key positions and identify the gaps between the individual's present work duties and those that would be required in the new post. Then one needs to establish agreed learning objectives from planned "learning by doing" options such as project work, which can also allow for the inclusion of minimum performance standards that must be achieved for the individual to demonstrate competence, be it writing skills, presentation skills, etc. Learning resources include mentors, participation in leadership institutes and conference participation. Accomplishments can be tracked not only ticking certain boxes, but by feedback about the individuals' progress to the individual and to/from those mentors interested in his/her progress. Finally, some way must be established to ensure regular review and monitoring of results. Everyone involved needs to maintain impetus which is not always easy, but even a checklist to indicate whether an objective has been achieved or is ongoing can be motivational. A regular review meeting is also an opportunity to rethink the relevancy of a learning objective.

The Cambridge succession planning strategy is still in its early days and we know that we have a lot more to do to develop internal talent. As our environment constantly changes so too will leadership competencies,

though of course there are still some basic skills that every leader requires. We hope to see more institutions developing effective succession planning processes so that all libraries could ultimately have first-rate candidates when the time comes to add to or replace current senior staff. CUL will continue to look for the best internal and external candidates for all our vacant posts while the library profession needs to develop library leaders who will benefit higher education as a whole. Growing our own through an effective succession management system could operate as both talent-growth and talent-retention mechanisms. Both are essential for the future success of the librarian profession.

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## WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

CUL - Cambridge University Library. http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/

Frye Leadership Institute. http://www.fryeinstitute.org/

Future Leaders programme. http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp/

HIMMS - Hybrid Information Management: Skills for Senior Staff. http://www.himss.bham.ac.uk/

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/