Developing Our Next Generation of Leaders

Succession planning helps nurture future leaders while also addressing skills gaps and ensuring that knowledge is not concentrated in one or two positions.

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At a meeting of Canadian special and academic librarians I attended recently, one library director said there would be a leadership crisis soon, with top-level librarians retiring en masse and younger librarians expressing no interest in assuming those top jobs. This person was referring to the academic environment, but her observation applies to libraries and information centers in other sectors as well.

Employees are often happy in their current position and don’t see any value in taking on administrative or managerial types of roles. Others may see top positions as dead ends, garnering little professional recognition (especially within larger organizations) while working long hours and fighting endless battles over budgets. In some environments, staff never have the opportunity to take on new roles or leadership duties because power is concentrated in the director’s or manager’s position.

Being a manager and a librarian are not mutually exclusive activities, but often the perception is the opposite. So, what can we do to turn that around? I’m hoping we can rethink what it means to be in a leading role so we can develop successful succession plans in our organizations.

Creating New Leaders

While not all information professionals who retire will be replaced (due to economic pressures and changes within organizations), there will be a large number of senior-level positions coming up for replacement soon. This means there is a great need to develop information professionals of all ranks so they are willing and able to take on leadership roles in our workplaces.

Succession planning, known as succession planning, is linked to career planning. Employees want to be able to plan or anticipate developments in their career over time. If they see no opportunity for skills development or potential to take on leadership roles, they may move elsewhere for new opportunities.

Succession planning is more than just finding people to promote from within—it is about developing capacity and skills among your staff. When you develop your staff, you are enabling them to continue the good work of your organization, including developing innovative new practices and contributing to the bottom line. You also help protect your organization—there is significant risk when too much authority and knowledge reside with too few people. To ameliorate this risk, you need to focus on developing leadership among your staff.

Creating leaders at all levels also benefits decision making and improves the services that you provide, even though some staff will never take on senior roles and some will leave and move to other organizations. By creating opportunities for learning new skills, such as budgeting, planning, supervision, and project management, you will improve morale and retain most if not all of the people you want to keep.

If you are approaching retirement or considering relocating in the next few years, you may want to discern how your staff perceive the role of information center manager or library director. What is it that motivates them? What learning experiences can you provide that will close skills gaps and help your staff expand their abilities and pique their interest in management activities?

Involving your staff in the process of succession planning is an effective way of encouraging them to think about the current and future needs of the organization. Starting this process in the years before significant retirements occur will help your staff see what they need to work toward in terms of skill sets. This process needs to be connected to your strategic planning, SWOT analysis work, and other forecasting you do to prepare for the future.

Involving your staff in succession planning is also good change management practice. It will allow staff members to examine their own skills and encourage them to identify areas where they could further develop their abilities, both to their and the information center’s benefit.

As part of your annual review process for each staff member, be sure to include personal development plans. This means that on an annual basis you are reviewing each individual’s progress and development and making plans for new courses, skills, and competencies...
to respond to changes in your organization. Planning for staff development as part of your personnel activities will ensure that any gaps in skills and knowledge will be addressed before you have a retirement crisis.

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Granted, you can hire skilled staff from outside and recruit leaders from other organizations, and this approach often delivers a very positive outcome for information centers. That said, it is incumbent upon us to develop the leadership and practical management skills of our staff, whether they end up taking the top job or not. If there is a crisis of leadership, the information center will be at risk within the organization, no matter how well it is regarded. The information center must continue to function with those who remain, so they must be able to take on leadership roles until new leaders are recruited. By leaving skills gaps unaddressed, a manager or leader is not fulfilling her duty to the organization to minimize risk and ensure continuity in times of transition or crisis. **SLA**

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