

Are You Being served? Embracing Servant Leadership, Trusting Library Staff, and Engendering Change

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Abstract

It is self-evident that academic libraries and librarianship are changing in substantive ways, ranging from the types of material we collect, to the way we approach information literacy instruction, to our positions within college and university organizational charts. In response to a rapidly changing environment, library administrators may try to quickly bring about changes in library policies, structure, and more. However, in the process, library administrators may inadvertently adopt rigid top-down approaches that can disenfranchise and disengage library workers, resulting in outcomes that serve neither students nor workers. A servant leadership approach to authority and influence may be a means to reverse this frustrating trajectory. Servant leadership requires that administrators focus on the existing expertise and the development potential of library workers as the means for ensuring fulfillment of the library's mission in an environment of constant change. Furthermore, this approach requires administrators to begin by accepting library workers' perspectives as their reality, instead of dismissing those perspectives. This approach shares the same foundations of two central practices of librarianship: reference and instruction. Librarians must believe users' information needs, listen to their experiences, and, with this information, consider ways to aid the user in progressing toward their goal. A challenge to this approach is that it requires more work for library administrators and library workers through consideration of different types of information and looking closely at voices of disagreement and resistance. While servant leadership appears more complex with slower progress, the end result of sincere engagement and effort by everyone in the library has the potential to aid in achieving the changes needed to keep academic libraries thriving.

Introduction

Several years ago, Meulemans and Carr (2013) detailed work to cultivate genuine, sustained partnerships between librarians and college faculty. A first step, they argued, is to reject the philosophy that librarians are in service to other faculty. The authors' experiences had shown that if librarians treated "what we do as a service, then we would continue to be treated as service providers", thereby sacrificing student learning (Meulemans and Carr 2013, 83). We called on librarians to enforce boundaries and adopt practices that place us in equal agency with disciplinary faculty colleagues in order to build a foundation for truly collaborative efforts that engage students in inquiry and research. Due to this, it may come as a surprise that in this article, we will focus on the interplay between authority, influence, and power, and how a *servant leadership* approach to authority and influence may perhaps result in the greatest amount of power and influence for library administrators, library workers, and the organization itself.

The Confusing Ecosystem of Academia, Libraries, Authority, and Influence

The nature of the relationship between academic librarians and their campus partners is an important component in how a library is able to accomplish its educational mission. The

organizational structures of academic libraries and the universities within which they exist can explicitly and/or implicitly encourage leadership that values the strong, authoritarian leader archetype. In these types of organizations, library workers have only limited agency over their work and are unable to fully utilize their expertise. Several factors contribute to how much “official” agency librarians and library workers have regarding their work. These factors can include but are not limited to:

- The classification of librarians at an organization: are librarians tenure-track faculty, specialized academic staff, or some other classification entirely?
- The ratio of tenured to untenured librarians, at institutions where a tenure track or equivalent status exists; and
- Whether or not librarians and/or library staff are unionized.

In organizations that are highly hierarchical (whether formally or informally), the argument is even stronger for a servant leadership approach that leverages the expertise of and encourages the autonomy of library workers.

How and where a library is situated within its university is a confounding variable; there is not a commonly agreed on ‘location’ for the library in the organizational structure of a university. Librarians themselves -- even within the same organization -- often have competing philosophies about their role in fulfilling a university’s educational mission. Typically, librarians are not instructors of record responsible for grading students, yet we are central to students’ education. Typically, we are not given formal authority over budget and personnel decision, yet we are often responsible for coordinating both library funds and other librarians and/or library staff. The flip side of this is that a librarian’s non-authoritative positionality can imbue them with a great deal of power. In these ways, librarians are akin to “bartenders” in the university: a listening ear to the various situations and quandaries of academia. Librarians are privy to disciplinary faculty members’ concerns and criticisms about students, students’ concerns and criticisms about disciplinary faculty, and administrators’ experiences with others throughout the university. However, too often this expertise is dismissed or considered “too specialized” to inform library-wide (or campus-wide) conversations, and their personal motivations may be framed as lacking in concern for the whole organization.

Another part of the academic library ecosystem is the relationship between library administrators and library workers. How this relationship functions, and the leadership philosophies of the parties involved, plays a crucial role -- if not *the* crucial role -- in how well a library organization is able to achieve its mission. And, while it is indeed true that formal authority rests with library administrators, *influence* and *power* are not the same as *authority*. Munduate and Medina (2004) define the following relevant terms:

- **Authority:** The institutionalized power between a superior and a subordinate that ensures compliance with the superior’s wishes because he or she is the boss.

- Empowerment: A motivational process involving feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members; to enhance the perception of self-efficacy, members use a set of strategies to influence and improve their behavior, taking responsibility for their own lives rather than depending on a leader to direct and motivate them.
- Influence: A force that one person (the leader) exerts on others (followers) to induce a change in the latter, including changes in behaviors, attitudes, and values.
- Leadership: Power relationships and influence processes between a leader and followers in which the leader exercises greater influence over the followers to accomplish group or organizational objectives.
- Power: The potential ability of a person to influence others; thus, influence is “power in action,” just as power is “potential influence.” (91)

In other words, “authority” can mean things like the formal power to sign off on budget requests for an organization, hire and fire employees, and have the final decision-making power. However, what is needed in an organization beyond administrators with formal authority are library leaders who are able to influence people both within the library and the larger campus community.

Servant Leaders Are Strong Leaders

In this article, we propose a rather radical flip in perspective: library administrators and those with formal authority within libraries will maintain the greatest amount of influence (or, as Munduate and Medina [2004] posit -- “power in action”) if they position themselves at the service of librarians and library staff. *Servant leadership* appears to hold promise in providing administrators with an approach in which everyone can authentically engage with the work of operationalizing an organization’s mission and vision, thereby enabling thoughtful change that results in an environment that is more conducive to student learning. We call for administrators within academic librarianship to move past a reliance on a “strong leader model” and to instead practice servant leadership. We ask for administrators to lead by listening, to walk away from a singular vision of what “should” be done, and to be guided by aiding library workers in realizing the mission and vision of a library.

Robert Greenleaf first explored the concept of servant leadership in the 1970s, stating that servant leaders prioritize the needs of other people, and that the “best test” to determine whether or not other people’s needs are prioritized are the following questions: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” (27). Servant leadership within libraries, which approaches the library worker with care for the whole person, allows all library workers to substantively participate in their work and, additionally, the ongoing evolution of academic librarianship. This model moves beyond the mantra of “self-care”, which places responsibility for one’s well-being on the individual (often specifically in reference to “work-life balance”), to one of “organizational care”, in which the organization itself works for the benefit of its employees as whole people. In order to bring about the kind of change that truly

benefits library workers *in addition* to patrons in an equitable, inclusive, and socially just fashion, libraries must rethink how decisions are made and actions are taken within a hierarchical system.

Letizia (2018) details existing definitions and characteristics of servant leadership, all of which place individual learning and growth as necessary for organizational growth. Leaders who make use of this approach center the expertise, perspectives, and developmental needs of those in their organization as vital for their own articulation of the organization's vision and mission. Spears builds upon Greenleaf's original work on servant leadership and outlines ten common characteristics in individuals that lend themselves to a servant leadership disposition (2010). In this set of characteristics, Spears emphasizes that servant leaders' communication and decision-making skills are "reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others" (2010, 27). Additionally, rather than relying "on one's positional authority [to make] decisions within an organization" and coerce those they lead to adopt practices, servant leaders rely upon their skills of persuasion (Spears 2010, 28). Martin's survey of academic librarians asking them what traits they sought in their leaders found that the most prevalent responses could be grouped together under the theme of "people first" leadership (2018), which indicates that library workers would be open to -- and perhaps thrive with -- administrators who take a servant leadership approach.

Many library administrators and library workers with administrative and leadership duties may chafe at the notion of servant leadership due to the implications of the word "servant", particularly within a feminized profession such as librarianship. Indeed, Richmond's (2017) critique of servant leadership from a feminist perspective cautions against associating the academic library with the term *servant* in any way due to the historical perceptions of libraries and their position as ancillary to a university's educational mission. Additionally, Richmond theorizes that the adoption of a servant leadership approach by female leaders "may be perceived as weakness" (2017, 60) and will actually work to further gender inequality. To the first point, it is important to consider one's positionality in determining whether or not to use the terms "servant" or "service" within a library context. A common assumption is that libraries "are not equal to" other departments on a university campus; this assumption is often held by university administrators, disciplinary faculty, and indeed many who work within libraries themselves. In this case, the historical "subservience" of libraries to others at the university should inspire librarians to exert themselves as partners equal to -- and not "servants" of -- disciplinary faculty so that they can best contribute to the educational mission of the university (Meulemans and Carr 2013). However, the power dynamics between administrators with formal authority and those they manage is not one in which the administrator has been seen as "subservient" -- in reality, it is quite the opposite. However, using the word "servant" judiciously within the context of a library setting is a prudent warning.

To the second point, in which Richmond posits that female administrators who adopt servant leadership qualities may be seen as weak, it is important to note that "...working from a need to serve does not imply an attitude of servility in the sense that the power lies in the hands of the followers..." (Richmond 2011, 1231). In servant leadership, a leader holds a great amount of power in the organization by taking on the responsibility to "[build] a learning

organization where each individual can be of unique value” (Van Dierendonck 2011, 1231). In this way, servant leadership embodies many of the skills and philosophies that undergird librarianship, and can be viewed as “librarianship done by a leader” at an organizational, rather than individual, level. Here, again, the positionality of those in the leader/follower relationship is important, in that it is the person or persons with formal authority who adopt the servant ethos rather than require it of those who are lower on the hierarchy.

Parallels Between Servant Leadership and Constructivist Pedagogy

A search of some of the leading leadership titles in librarianship yields only a few articles on the topic of servant leadership in libraries (although Letizia [2018], Pearce, Wood, and Wassenar [2018], and Vuori [2017] provide helpful overviews and examples of servant and distributed leadership in higher education more generally). However, it is actually an application of an approach with which librarians and library staff are quite familiar. Servant leadership requires close listening, a focus on engaging individual learning and transformation in place of organizational capacity, and centering humans as an ends themselves as opposed to a means to an end (Spears 2010). Letizia (2018) provides a thorough review of the various “flavors” of servant leadership. These practices and values will feel familiar to librarians as they are mirrored in reference and instructional approaches common in academic libraries. Indeed, servant leadership bears many parallels to constructivist pedagogical approaches in which the learner’s needs guide the librarian’s efforts.

Constructivism in various approaches to library instruction and reference is well represented in the literature; only a few here are noted: Albert and Emery (2017), Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger (2004), Elmborg (2002), Meulemans (2016), Montgomery (2015), Rodrigues and Rehberg Sedo (2008). Indeed, librarians’ instructional efforts often bear the theory’s hallmarks: centering student development and learning in teaching, using teaching approaches that actively engage learners in authentic experiences (as opposed to lectures on a particular topic), and structuring instructional content based on learner needs. Students “construct” their own knowledge, as opposed to having it “passed on fully-formed from teachers to students” (Elmborg 2002, 457). Current research into critical information literacy instruction further centers students by taking into consideration their lived experiences within “historical, cultural, social, economic, [and] political” contexts (Gregory and Higgins 2013, 3). We see this constructivist approach -- in which the learner is the driving force behind the structure of the instruction -- mirrored in a servant leadership approach in which library workers are the driving force behind how the library achieves its organizational mission.

Just as librarians are integral to student knowledge creation and the educational mission of a university, so too administrators are integral to the development of those they supervise and the mission of their libraries. Within constructivism, the concept of the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1978) describes what a student can’t do without guidance from an instructor; it is here where instructors can focus their efforts on not only content knowledge but identifying and employing effective approaches to engage the student with this content so they can progress in their learning. If administrators approach managing a library as instructors approach teaching students, we can see that administrators’ roles in determining the “zone of

proximal development” of each of the individuals and groups that they manage, and providing those individuals and groups with the tools and resources they need to progress and grow, is one of paramount importance. Library administrators are, to use the common phrase, the “guides on the sides” who create a working environment in which individuals and, thus, the organization itself, can learn and grow -- one of the central tenets of servant leadership.

A Call to Action: Just Believe

When librarians are in a reference interview, the first task is to listen closely -- without judgment -- to what the student is saying about what they are working on, where they have looked, and what struggles they are having. Students often only seek help after they have tried but feel they aren't making progress; they may already be frustrated and anxious about their ability to do the work. A librarian may think that the student has misstepped, done something wrong, or “hasn't really tried yet” (and may be correct in their assumptions). However, dismissing students' perceptions could lead students to disengage with their education because they do not feel validated. Librarians have to meet students where they are in order to help students move through the research process -- not chastise them for a lack of attention in class or not looking at a particular resource. Librarians serve *the learning needs* of students by listening, being curious, taking their concerns seriously, and guiding them to the resources that they may need to find the answers to their questions. Importantly, librarians do not tell students what their theses should be, or how they should go about writing their papers, or read scholarly articles for students. In reference interactions, librarians are not *at the service* of the student, but they are practicing a form of servant leadership.

This is analogous to the need for library administrators to “just believe” the experiences of those that they lead by practicing listening with humility. Believe library workers when they ask questions, express concerns, or provide feedback. Take them seriously and consider not only what they are saying, but *why they are saying it*. Many (if not most) administrators in libraries were at one point librarians and/or library staff themselves, so the temptation to hang on to the belief that one “knows best” about library operations can be great, even when they may be far removed (either physically, hierarchically, or temporally) from the actual day-to-day work of those that they manage. Servant leadership is an approach in which leaders do not place themselves at the metaphorical “head of the table”. Instead, they are the person at the table who is responsible for making sure everyone has access to what they need. In the workplace, this includes the short and long term resources people need to succeed in their work, and where “work” is defined as making progress towards fulfillment of the organization's mission and vision. No one person has all the information, and no one person has the best vision for the way forward. A servant leader rejects that *they alone* know best, welcomes multiple and especially contradictory voices and evidence, and does this by taking seriously what others have to offer -- not just in words, but in their actions.

What does “just believing” look like in practice? One example is by elevating the experience of library workers to be used in concert with, and to provide context to, quantitative data in order to make decisions. Libraries often rightfully so go out of our way to gather user feedback through focus groups and surveys, but we often don't extend this same courtesy to

ourselves. When decisions are being made in the library, administrators and those with decision-making power need to put as much thought and effort into gathering and analyzing feedback of library workers as we do for library users. We are not calling for libraries to disband with “data-driven decision making”; quite the contrary, we are calling for additional data points to be taken into consideration. Magnus, Belanger, and Faber (2018, n.p.) outline a more critical approach to assessment in libraries as a way to “

.” Although their analysis centers mainly on gathering and analyzing data of library users by libraries, they raise some important and salient points that should also be considered by leaders when hearing input from library workers that may be contrary to “what the data tells us”:

- What is the purpose of the assessment, who decides what to assess, and who benefits from the work?
- What are the histories and contexts of the methods we choose, and how do these shape our work? Do these methods risk alienating or silencing other voices?
- What is considered “evidence” and who decides?
- Are we doing our work in ways that enable power sharing and engagement with user communities at all stages of the process, from question formulation and data analysis, to decision-making?

It could be problematic to rely upon data without considering its context, or what role the data gatherer’s positionality and history may play in shaping that data, when making decisions in a library. Creative, unique, critical, and admittedly labor intensive means to hear from students are vital, as they are similarly vital in order to more fully understand the experiences of library workers. A servant leader recognizes that the ecosystem of information may make the work more complex, but results in better and more inclusive outcomes for everyone -- library workers and the greater campus community.

However, although servant leaders may solicit the input and feedback of those they manage and supervise through activities and structures such as working groups, task forces, and meetings with stakeholders, these efforts are often experienced as performative by those “lower” in the hierarchy. This perception of performativity needs to be carefully considered and addressed with intentionality and true concern. Otherwise, library workers may feel invalidated and that their expertise and knowledge are not taken seriously. From this, library workers may conclude they are justified in obstructing changes and/or by disengaging; administrators take this response as evidence for their own conclusion that they are the ones with the “correct” vision forward. As many in academic libraries have already experienced, this becomes a situation in which no one is served -- *especially* not the campus community or student learning. A recognition of the unique knowledge that *all* library workers bring to the table also means that everyone has a responsibility to participate in leadership.

The result of “just believing” when seeking input, feedback, and proposed solutions may be that the end result is very different from what library administrators had initially envisioned. However, library initiatives and services that are developed using the full scope of expertise

available in the library will likely be more sustainable and feasible. Importantly, library workers will also have the incentive to remain engaged in their work and in communicating with administrators because they will have evidence that their perspectives have been considered and acted upon. This does not mean that everyone gets what they want; it does mean that all concerns and ideas are considered and discussed, and that parameters for projects are clearly and transparently outlined prior to asking for feedback. Perhaps most importantly, when library workers respond negatively to an idea or service, their response is not dismissed.

What does the call to “just believe” mean in the face of what seems to be a refusal? Lanclos’ (2019, n.p.) keynote on giving close consideration to refusal aids greatly here:

Refusal is an action, not just a lack of action. It is exercising agency, not just “non-compliance.” So, faculty/academic staff refuse to use systems, such as an LMS/VLE, or lecture capture, refusing and rejecting the premise that they and their expertise can be reduced to a piece of content like a lecture, or a cache of powerpoint slides. These choices are not about inability, or digital skills or capability. These choices are made because of people’s concerns about how their labor can be exploited, taken advantage of, made invisible or redundant. They are refusing in a context of lack of trust, precarious labor, and a de-valuing of academia and academic work.

While the quotation above refers to a refusal to adopt software, this is applicable to other rejected initiatives and changes that library workers view as exploitative, and as a potential disservice to the learners and community the library serves. With this, refusal becomes essential information that should be deeply explored instead of “batted away” as library workers operating in self-interest or “not knowing any better”. The refusal becomes as important as any quantitative data. The person can indeed learn new software -- what they may actually be expressing is that they do not have the capacity at this point in time to take on another thing to learn, or that the software will be more problematic than what is currently used, or that they are afraid that using this particular piece of software will take away a portion of their job that shapes their identity. The servant leader takes the refusal as a necessary piece of evidence in order to determine what should happen next.

Conclusion: We Work Together

So, what does this mean for libraries? Are we stuck in an unending power struggle between administrators and library workers? This dynamic can start to change tomorrow, as soon as you go into your next meeting. A recognition of the unique knowledge that *all* library workers bring to the table also means that everyone has a responsibility to participate in leadership. However, we are not advocating for library workers to “manage up”, nor are we placing all problems at the feet of administrators. The responsibility to initiate and manage change in academic libraries lies with all of us -- librarians, library staff, and administrators alike. We are all subject to common external constraints such as budgets, regulations, building maintenance, technological advances, and more, but the one constant that we each have

control over is ourselves and our actions. The way in which we behave with one another will create the foundation for shared leadership within our organizations.

A corollary to “Just Believe” is “We Work Together”. An administrator is not *the* single person In Charge of the Library. They are assigned and have the expertise required for monitoring the organization’s needs, making campus and community connections, and coordinating the development of a library’s vision and mission, but it is the library workers who are immersed in the day-to-day operations of the library. The reference librarian knows exactly how to improve reference while making it more efficient. The user services specialist troubleshooting tech problems when adding movies to course management systems knows what needs to be done to permanently address this problem. Expertise in an organization is distributed across people and hierarchies, and only by working together and valuing the contribution of library workers’ different areas of expertise will an organization both fulfill its mission to its community and also continue to engage those workers in a meaningful and respectful way.

Engaging in servant leadership will almost certainly result in change happening more slowly, perhaps frustratingly so. However, “believing” and “working together” will help create a space where nuanced disagreement can occur that results in thoughtful change -- benefiting students and library workers alike. Berg and Seeber outline in their book *The Slow Professor* (2016) how asking for the space to approach work more slowly and intentionally isn’t about academics shirking work. On the contrary, eschewing the speed of the corporate university requires *more*, not *less* effort. Similarly, servant leadership may result in goals being achieved more slowly, *because it is more difficult to do*. It asks more of everyone involved. Servant leadership is a more challenging ethos than many other leadership approaches. There are similar leadership models that go beyond centering individual growth; the Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation (SALT) model focuses on social activism and achieving justice which appears even more complex and challenging for leaders and group members (Museus, Lee, Calhoun, Sánchez-Parkinson, and Ting 2015). This model perhaps could be a more ‘full’ manifestation of servant leadership. But the connections noted between librarianship and servant leadership make it of particular interest here.

It appears that library administrators are at an advantage because the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership share important similarities with academic librarianship and information literacy instruction. Library administrators can build upon their existing expertise in librarianship to not only create change that is for the better of everybody, but also to have that change be embraced.

“Crews are a team. Any business is a team, and the whole point of having people do different jobs and be experts in their specific department is for them to help in any way they know how. The director isn’t there to bark out orders. They are the conductor bringing everyone’s talents together to execute their own artistic vision. Asking and bouncing ideas off people, and even changing your mind, is allowed. It’s so hard to ever show any sort of weakness, especially when you’re a woman at the top of the project, in a business you never

thought you'd actually be able to break into. But going through all the possibilities and asking for help is not weak, it's smart." -Abbi Jacobson, "I Might Regret This" (2018, 219)

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