Helene Gold

At least you didn't burn the place down

Leadership isn't for everyone

I arrived at my first tenure-track faculty librarian job, fresh MLS in hand, 27 years old, ready to take on the world. I loved that quirky little liberal arts college. The culture of creativity, freedom, and openness allowed me to do almost whatever I wanted. I had little supervision and no mentoring. My co-workers weren't particularly interested in how I taught, how I formed relationships with my liaison departments, or how I approached or prioritized projects.

For 13 years, I thrived in an unstructured environment, where I made big and exciting things happen and was confident in my abilities to identify areas of need, create action plans, and implement new programs. My campus colleagues lavished me with positive feedback and praise. I was a one-woman force of library awesomeness!

For personal reasons, I left librarianship for two years to work as an administrator for a large trade association and my schmoozing and creativity made me successful, but selling training programs to association members just didn't do it for me. I missed teaching, and I really, really missed the students.

In 2013, now with 15 years professional experience, an extraordinary opportunity for academic library leadership presented itself (chair of Information Literacy and Research Services Department at Tallahassee Community College). Everyone gave me the same advice: You're ready! It's time! Do it!

So…I caved, despite my initial reaction of "I don't think I want to be in charge of a library department."

For two years in my new leadership position, I struggled to be a mentor to my librarian colleagues. I didn't really enjoy energizing and inspiring my team. I wanted to teach and encourage students, as well as plan student-centered activities and events. I struggled with the managerial aspects of running a department, spending hours keeping track of shift schedules, time-off requests, and reviewing the Reference Desk calendar. Maybe I was making more work for myself than necessary, but there was a blurry line between my official duties as a program/department leader and my unofficial supervisory duties (all librarians, including me, report to the director). I didn't know how to have conversations with librarians about time management, establishing relationships with faculty, or developing innovative teaching techniques. I knew what worked for me, but I had no idea how to help others develop their strengths and skills. Combine these frustrations with having to decide what channels the public TV should be tuned to and play-

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ing months-long phone tag with furniture vendors, and you can easily see a picture emerge of a cranky and frustrated leader who was making everyone a tad unhappy.

Yet, I powered on for two years. I told myself: I am a leader! I make things happen—big things! I once created an exciting and dynamic freshman orientation program with campus-wide collaboration and participation. In my association job, I created a webinar training program that is still successful today after six years. If I can do those things, I certainly should be able to do this, right? Wrong. Just because I have a keen ability to see the big picture and implement big plans with pep in my step doesn't mean I have the ability to coach and mentor and lead a team.

ACRL Leadership Immersion 2015 changed everything for me. I emerged from the program (which was amazing) with two revelations: 1) I have no leadership style, and 2) my colleagues' success doesn't satisfy me the way that playing a role in my students' success does. My director always told me that "Your team's success is your success," but I just didn't feel it.

Steven Bell recommends that we develop our own unique leadership style drawing from a variety of models,[1,2] and that's what I tried to do. I read books, attended webinars, participated in campus faculty development workshops, but I was never asked, "Do you enjoy this? Is this a good fit for you?" I liked the idea of rising to the next level in my career (I can hear my uncle now, in his raspy, booming Jewish Brooklyn voice: "You work your way up! That's how it's done! Promotion is success!")

Although I received mentoring and guidance from my director and fellow library department chair, it just didn't click. My past leadership experience consisted almost entirely of me doing my own thing in my own way without mentorship, and I rarely worked as part of a library team. When I arrived at the Tallahassee Community College Library in 2013, I found a strong and effective leader managing productive and happy teams. Needless to say, I was a bit lost and very much outside my comfort zone.

Taking an honest inventory of my professional experiences and having the ability to take a huge step back and self-assess my situation was the key to realizing that department leadership wasn't right for me. I recovered from my leadership fail by assessing my strengths and weaknesses and making changes in how I communicate and prioritize my work. Nothing makes me happier than teaching, mentoring, and goofing around with students, and now that I have returned to my daily librarian duties, I'm as happy as a clam in a cardigan. For the first time in 20 years, I am a proud and productive member of a great team with a great leader. Although my uncle would not be impressed with my leadership hiccup, he would have hugged me and said, "At least you tried, and you didn't burn the place down." Thanks, Unk.

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Notes

1. Steven Bell, "There's No Such Thing as Library Leadership," *Library Journal*'s *Academic Newswire,* September 25, 2013, http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/09/opinion/leading-from-the-library/theres-no-such-thing-as-library-leadership-leading-from-the-library/.

2. Steven Bell, "Getting Back on Track After a Leadership Failure," *Library Journal*'s *Academic Newswire,* May 6, 2015 http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2015/05/opinion/leading-from-the-library/getting-back-on-track-after-a-leadership-failure-leading-from-the-library/. 𝓷