Professional Development and Middle Management:
Making it Win-Win

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Abstract

For librarians, professional development is a deeply held value. We know that the world in which we work is continually changing and that we must actively keep up with the changes in order to remain effective. This has its challenges, and those become especially acute after one has moved into a management position with increased responsibilities, such as the responsibility of developing and mentoring others. Combine this with workload, and often personal development goals are pushed to a lower priority. This paper will examine issues affecting professional development along with growth for librarians in management positions and discuss what professionals in these situations can do to take charge of their own development.

Introduction

Development for the mid-career professional librarian holds many challenges. As the majority of the profession approaches retirement, finding librarians with the appropriate mix of leadership abilities, administrative potential and emotional intelligence to step into vacant positions is increasingly difficult.[9] In looking for solutions to this problem it is critical that, as professionals, we pay particular attention to mid-career apathy and in some cases burnout. These are much discussed terms in the management and education/career literature (a search on these terms in *Library Literature* or *LISA* brings back hundreds of hits), and they can occur at any time and in any profession but are particularly prevalent in those individuals who have either been in their present management job for 3-5 years or those who have worked for 10-15 years in positions of increasing responsibility.

Feeling stuck in a job can happen at any stage of a career, but the role of a manager in any organization is particularly problematic and in many cases takes the individual away from their primary motivating interests in the profession. For some librarians those interests may be teaching, research, reference, technical services, information technology/digital library work or collection building. Moving from one of these highly focused, front-line positions into a management role with the responsibility for managing people, budgets, space and the organization's advancement leaves little time for continuing to develop skills in core areas of interest. It leaves even less time for reflection on where professional development is needed.

Making a Negative into a Positive

Most management jobs are challenging, especially in librarianship, where "…the continuous expansion of the world of knowledge and the rapid development of increasingly complex technology to organize information so that it is reasonably retrievable remain a constant challenge to the competency of the individual."[3] In many cases, an individual's first management job is a shock to their system in terms of the level of responsibility the manager is expected to take on, but it is also an exhilarating and challenging step that most people avidly seek out and gladly take. The initial challenge is in learning how to be a manager and mastering the basic skills and techniques necessary to the performance of the job. What happens next in many cases is that the challenge of the job expands to fill all of the time available and the professional development needs of the manager are overridden by the demands of the job. Who has time to read all, if any, of the articles on issues of interest? Who has time to attend training seminars or write papers? Who has time to consistently evaluate his or her own goals and objectives when they are working with their direct reports on their goals and objectives? Some managers do, but for many by the time they realize what has happened, the size of the hole they are in appears to be so deep that they can never climb out.

It is important to note that these are individuals who enjoy what they do and love the profession they are in, but feel helpless to change their situation.   The loss of a feeling of control can be professionally debilitating and is a serious issue for all professionals, but especially for middle managers. Caputo states:

> "…psychologists have found that a feeling of some control is necessary for healthy functioning, which means that staff members are more likely to experience stress than managers, who have increased opportunities for control. The exceptions are **middle managers**,[emphasis added] who have been found to be more susceptible to burnout than managers at other levels, a fact fully consistent with data showing that most middle managers have more responsibility than authority; in other words, they have too little control."[3]

As a result, people in this situation begin to doubt themselves and loss of confidence in one's abilities can result in failure to innovate and initiate change. The important element, and the one that we want to highlight, is the need for individual empowerment and the need to take control of the situation. Getting involved in other activities, even those that require a minimal amount of time, can help restore confidence and a sense of control over the work life.

Mentoring, Training and the Middle Manager

One of the major challenges with taking on a management position is in mentoring and/or training. Recent concerns over the future of librarianship, including the "graying of the profession," the closing of library schools, etc., have put increased emphasis on new librarians, both in attracting people to the profession and mentoring people in their first few years on the job. The wide variety of fellowship programs that have been started in the last five years offer an example of this. As a profession, we are focusing the majority of our developmental efforts on people in the early years of their career. "However, as useful as these programs are for

inculcating new professional librarians into the library's culture and in retaining them beyond the probationary period, they do little to address the critical challenges of replacing those retiring from senior positions, retraining and redeploying existing librarians, and recruiting new librarians into high-demand positions."[9] In short, this approach neglects to develop more experienced librarians.

Any career move will be accompanied by losses and gains, pros and cons. Moving into middle management means the gain of some autonomy but the loss of close supervision, and oftentimes mentoring. A new manager will likely receive very little training from their supervisor, because the belief is that they have the skills and ability to learn on their own. This may be a reasonable expectation, but it can nevertheless be a difficult transition to deal with, especially when the new job responsibilities seem so much greater. Opportunities for external training (such as the ARL Library Management Skills workshops) have expanded over the last decade; however, this type of training is rarely required by organizations.[13] An additional hurdle is that the increased responsibility of supervising others generally means a shift in focus from taking care of one's own development to taking care of those people in the department. So the loss is double – less development coming from one's boss, and less time to focus on personal growth.

Being a middle manager means being a bit "out there" on one's own in so many ways. It's part of the very nature of the job. No matter how much preparation one has been given, in the end, most managers end up figuring out a lot on their own. Is it any surprise then that professional development works the same way? New managers need to take the lead in finding and getting the guidance they need to succeed in their position. This is not to say that library administrators don't need to do any mentoring; on the contrary, they have an "important responsibility to prepare current and future middle managers."[10] It's just that middle managers must not abdicate their responsibility for their own development, especially in the absence of administrators who mentor. Middle managers need to own their careers and be committed to maintaining their professional viability. The first step in this is to perform some self-assessment.

Assessing the Situation

Regular and realistic self-assessment is a critical component of effective career management.   Professionals must always be surveying the landscape of their current situation, thinking about future goals and, most importantly, how to attain them.   Three assessment areas will be discussed here. The first area is job satisfaction – what makes work good or bad and how important these are to one's position. The second area is more about development; i.e., how one is learning and growing on the job. This can mean keeping up with trends and new technologies, and managing the workload so that there is time for those projects that teach new things. The last area involves looking at how organizational values impact development choices. A form for use in performing this assessment is included as an addendum to this paper.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is something that one generally has a pretty good sense of, and at any given moment most of us know if we're happy or miserable, although sometimes we confuse

burnout with serious dissatisfaction. Tomlin differentiates the two: "Chronic stress, pressure, and deadlines, with no hope of improvement in the foreseeable future can lead to the exhaustive state we refer to as burnout. However, many people who have flamed out still feel passionately about their work, but they are simply too overwhelmed to continue. …There is a disconnect between personal or professional interests and work. The value they placed on their work has evaporated. Pride in accomplishments fades and getting by is enough."[11] Thus, burnout and job satisfaction are clearly related but not necessarily dependent on one another. This paper does not attempt to assess or address burnout; there are many good resources for this. Janette Caputo's _Stress and Burnout in Library Service_ is one that contains many detailed quizzes for measuring burnout.

Although job satisfaction is an area that most of us have a basic handle on, we would suggest that some thoughtful inquiry will provide useful and at times eye-opening information on how things are going and what really matters to us. This kind of assessment *should be* ongoing, but at a minimum it should be something every professional deliberately considers at least once or twice a year, perhaps during appraisal time or on that beach vacation. It needs to be done at those times when it's easier to see the big picture and get some perspective. The process itself is relatively simple because it is subjective after all and based entirely on the feelings of the individual. The question to ask is: On the whole, how do you feel about your job – is it positive or negative? Or, and this is more likely, is it a bit of both? Then consider why it's positive/negative/both. Another way to ask this question is, looking back over the past year, what kind of year was it and why? Try and label the basis of that evaluation – whatever it may be – everything is valid, everything counts. Some examples could be:

- I have fun at work/work isn't fun anymore
- I have friends at work/I'm lonely
- I am well paid/I am underpaid
- My accomplishments get recognized/I feel unappreciated
- I like my office/I dislike the physical environment
- I'm challenged/I'm frustrated
- I'm busy/I'm bored
- I feel in control/I'm overwhelmed
- Work is exciting/I'm tired of doing the same thing

In the end, this exercise should result in a short list of statements that describe the feelings one has about work. Some of the items on the list may require a little more probing in order to articulate the root cause of the feeling. Even something such as "I like my office" can be probed a bit further, "because I need to have the privacy" to help identify what is critical for a positive work experience. The goal is to articulate one's own particular set of needs and wants.

In doing an exercise like this, it's important to emphasize that no time or effort should be spent on trying to fix a problem or figure out whose to blame ("If only X would change I would be happy."). Taking ownership of one's career means realizing that the only person one can control is oneself, and the only effective way to initiate positive change is to focus on those things we have control over. Covey illustrates this concept brilliantly through his idea of the

"Circle of Influence."[4] So the point is to get the facts and address *the reality* of the situation, whether it's good or bad, so that it can be ascertained exactly what is working and what is not.

The next part of this exercise is to rank the feelings listed in terms of importance. A simple way to do this is to consider, for each item on the list, what impact a reversal of that situation would have, e.g., the friend at work moves on to another job, or the large office is given to someone else, or that annoying person in the next cube leaves the organization. How much weight would the loss or gain of that single item have? Would it turn a negative situation positive? Or would it be a "deal-breaker?" Finally, taking a realistic look at the organization, how likely is it that the situation will ever change? That is, how permanent are these positive and negative aspects of our work? If it's highly likely that the things most critical to one's happiness are going to go away in a year or two, then it's important to be prepared for that and to have a plan for dealing with it. Thinking about it ahead of time, free from the stress and emotion of a change in progress, will lessen the blow and make the change easier to handle. Likewise, it is folly to spend years waiting for a negative to change if it is never going to happen.

Learning and Development

"The term development implies a positive step forward towards the future, with better personal well-being and professional growth as the outcomes. Career development no longer implies onwards and upwards for the broad mass of people, and perhaps it never did. Career development is coming to mean developing the workplace in a way which is personally satisfying. Development can occur when people move sideways, downwards and even out of an organization. It can occur in almost any situation but almost always involves active learning. Development is no longer a series of promotions; it is the ability to create challenge in even mundane tasks and to visualize ongoing challenge and growth in the future."[7]

The first years of being a manager bring many chances to learn. After mastering the basic aspects of the job, though, it's important to ensure that professional development continues to happen. Certainly, new projects and opportunities will present themselves, but what is important is how these are managed and where they fit in reaching long-term career goals.

One issue for many managers has to do with getting overloaded with work projects. As new priorities get piled on top of older ones, falling behind is easy to do. While this situation may be fairly common, that does not make it acceptable. If the tell-tale signs are there – an overflowing email inbox, for example, or an increase in the amount of time work is being done from home - then it is probable that the workload isn't being managed effectively. The longer one stays in a particular job, the greater the likelihood of getting buried in backlog because responsibilities inevitably increase as one becomes more experienced. Why does this matter? This matters because most of us invariably put the things that are *most important* for our personal growth on the back burner. Thus, inefficient management of one's workload prevents us from learning new things; *it stifles growth*. There are some people who think of a backlog as "job security" – these individuals could not be further from the truth. Rather, those backlogs are walls, and those individuals who maintain them are being *walled in* from achievement and opportunity.

How much backlog is unacceptable? If day-to-day duties prevent the achievement of goals – from publishing a paper, for instance, or learning about a new technology -- over the course of months or years, then we would argue that there is a problem. Managers need to recognize that they can't do everything. Tasks that have been mastered (and/or become rote) should be delegated to an appropriate staff member thus giving that individual a chance to learn and gain some valuable experience. Also, as jobs change and expand, so must the way in which the work is managed. In other words, the organizational system that was used to manage workload in an entry-level job may not scale for one with a wider array of responsibilities. The key element, though, is to never lose site of the long-term goals. Covey's third habit, "Put First Things First," illustrates this point. Everything that we do each day must move us forward, if only in the smallest fraction. There will always be work to do; there will always be something demanding time and energy, and, in fact, it's easy to lose *years* this way! Being strategic means selecting and prioritizing projects to move oneself *and the organization* forward at the same time.

While it is important to look at things that block development (like poor time/task management), it is more essential to highlight the learning that has taken place. Conducting what we call a "personal learning inventory" can do this – this involves simply making a list of what one has learned over a particular time period. Like the job satisfaction assessment, this should be done at least once or twice a year. The simple act of reflecting on one's growth as a professional and writing it down can be very enlightening. Oftentimes, change occurs so slowly that it is easy to forget how much effort it took to get where we are now. The inventory can and should contain specific things, such as skills or knowledge attained, as well as broad lessons learned. Again, everything counts, but one shouldn't include "filler" such as the training class that took up a whole day but had no lasting effect in terms of transferable skills. This is meant to be an honest assessment for personal use only and including such things is pointless. Since human beings often learn best the hard way -- that is, from mistakes -- it is important to revisit any mistakes that were made and to gather whatever lessons one can from them.   Revisiting failures can be difficult but, if approached with a sincere desire to learn something, worthwhile.

Once the learning inventory is complete, we should consider what's missing. For example, for academic librarians not having one item involving information technology on the list could be a red flag indicating a gap. The goal at this stage of the assessment is to find the gaps and do something about them. Some will be easy to identify – most people are aware of something that they know they need to learn but, for various reasons, are too busy to get to. Others may be harder to recognize; thus, soliciting feedback from colleagues, mentors, friends, or a supervisor, while not required, can be helpful. For each gap, consider what the real learning need is and how it can be accomplished. For example, a manager who plans to stay in management may not need to know how to program in PHP, but they would need to know that it exists, what it's used for, etc. This learning gap could be filled simply by reading a few technology magazines or talking to Systems or IT staff on a regular basis. The learning inventory is complete when the scope of each gap has been defined and the final list prioritized.

Organizational Assessment

At the same time that the self-assessment is being done, it is vital to take a look at the areas in which the organization assesses each individual and make sure that the value of each of these is clear. Assessment and appraisal documents are often developed over years and are representative of the values held by similar organizations. The first step is to break down the performance appraisal document and pick out the areas that seem particularly relevant in light of one's goals. These should then be used in conjunction with the personal assessment to formulate a plan for forward movement. For example, if leadership is valued and this is an area of interest, then it is easier to make a stronger case to a supervisor for some training or future opportunities to expand in this area.

Listing activities, such as professional activity and committee work, is another exercise that we are required to perform on a yearly basis. Pay attention to the categories and learn about the organization from them. Is committee work at the university level valued? Are continuing education credits valued? How important is committee work in professional societies? How about writing and presenting? Are university activities to be closely linked to one's current job or can they be removed? If these are categories on the activity form filled out at appraisal time, then the answer is yes, they are valued. The important issue here for the mid-career manager is that they can often provide the opportunity to explore in areas not typically part of the job. For example, can the head of a branch library do volunteer work tutoring students in the writing center on campus? Can one work on an organizational task force that is interesting but not directly related to one's daily work? In many cases the answer is yes, and both the organization and the individual gain visibility as a result of allowing staff to explore and learn outside of their usual context.

Making a Game Plan

This paper has largely been about assessment because it is such a key component of strategic career management. However, assessment without action is worthless. One *must* make a commitment to not waste the effort. Planning naturally flows from assessment. Going through these exercises should give one a sense of the current climate: what makes work enjoyable (or not), what growth opportunities are there, and what administration values. What should follow is a vision of the future to be made real through the creation of long-term goals, with a road map, or a short term "to do" list to get there. It is important to make the goals achievable and find a balance between setting the bar high enough to make a real change and low enough so that they realistically can be attained. Academic librarians possess the good fortune to work in an environment that supports growth. The professional that one becomes is largely the sum of what one has learned. In other words, *these are the things that go with us, wherever our careers take us*.

Anyone who performs these assessment exercises should, in the end, communicate the results to his or her immediate supervisor in the *context of their long-term goals*. If an employee is happy, or even if they aren't, administration needs to know. Good managers like to know that their staff think about these things, and this is particularly important with experienced professionals, who, as previously stated, are not as actively mentored as junior staff. That said, it

should be emphasized that this is not to suggest anyone should go to their managers and complain. Rather, it should be a *strategy session*, and all statements should be made in a non-reactive, problem-solving way. For example:

 "I really enjoy working with my colleagues, but I'm also feeling a little restless with my job. I've been thinking about how I would feel more challenged at work, and I'd like to be put on project X (or go to training Y) to achieve my long term goal of Z. How can we make this happen?"
Or, if a solution isn't evident –

"Here is where I am now…. Here is where I want to be… Can you help me devise a strategy for getting there?"

The best way to bring about a change in one's work life is to be the driving force behind making it happen, by being the one to assess the situation, identify the problem(s) if there are any, and prescribe it the solution (or take responsibility for the search for it). This proactive approach will be more likely to get a positive response from senior management and provides a much greater feeling of control over one's work life.

An element of the planning that should not be ignored, but all too often is, relates to the next job. We should always be able to envision the next job and have a sense of how long it is appropriate to stay in the current one and/or with the current organization. People often think that if they are happy with their work situation now, they needn't think about these things, and we feel this is a mistake. No matter what the level of satisfaction, one should always be thinking about that next job. Resumes must be kept up-to-date, and subscriptions to job listservs, automated job search agents and the like be maintained. It's worth stating that searching for, applying to and interviewing for other positions is not in the least disloyal. To say so is to make it personal – and work is *not* personal. On the contrary, looking for other positions is a core part of strategic career management because it shows that the individual is keeping his or her options open to reach long-term goals. When one considers the alternative -- waiting until one is miserable, burnt out, or out of options to start looking -- it's not a difficult choice to make.

We think performing these exercises will give a realistic view of work; it is important that we don't have fantasies about the perfect job. All jobs have their pros and cons and are stimulating in some ways and enervating in others. Being realistic and positive about our own abilities to make choices and implement change can make all the difference in the world.

Conclusion

George Eliot wrote, "*The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.*" This can be reshaped to state that the strongest principle of professional growth lies in making choices that force us to grow. These choices may take us out of our comfort zone, but in order for our profession to thrive we must be willing and able to do this. Self-assessment is tough work, and it requires us to be honest with ourselves and our bosses, but the benefits are tremendous and will have a lasting impact on the individual who is brave enough to take on the challenge.

Addendum: Assessment Form

Job Satisfaction

Overall: 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
         dissatisfied ←――――→ satisfied

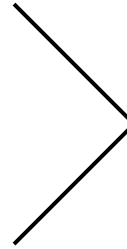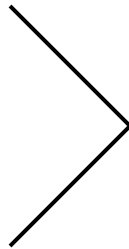   Feeling   Neg/Pos   Change Factor   Priority/Importance
                                             (Likely/Unlikely)

Learning Inventory

Things Learned: Gaps: Learning Goals:

Organizational Assessment

Organizational Values   Related Goals

1. Bailey, M. (1978, Sept.). Requirements for middle managerial positions. *Special Libraries, 69* (9), 323-331.

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4. Covey, S. (1990). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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6. Hoadley, I. (1999, July). Reflections: management morphology – how we got to be who we are. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *25* (4), 267-273.

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8. Hubbard, M. (2002). Exploring the sabbatical or other leave as a means of energizing a career. *Library Trends, 50* (4), 603-614.

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10. Sullivan, M. (1992, Fall). The changing role of the middle manager in research libraries. *Library Trends, 41* (2), 269-291.

11. Tomlin, A. (1999, September). Looking for that nudge? *The One Person Library, 16* (5), 10-11.

12. Walker, J. (2000). *The age advantage: making the most of your midlife career transition*. New York: Berkley Books.

13. Wittenbach, S., et. al. (1992, July). Management preparation and training of department heads in ARL libraries. *College and Research Libraries, 53* (4), 319-330.

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