

# The Leader As Teacher

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When first asked to write about this topic, I puzzled about what this meant. A library manager or department head who teaches classes is just a teacher in those settings. Is every teacher a leader? Probably not. Is every leader a teacher? Again the answer is no; many library directors do not teach classes. I stayed mired in this swamp for many days—days spent reading and reviewing a large portion of the leadership literature. I just couldn't see the relationship between these concepts—leader and teacher. Leader as teacher. I could not get past the vision of a classroom of students and a teacher who may or may not be a manager/leader. What could be said about teaching that had anything to do with leadership? Neither did I like the limitations of this topic by thinking about the attributes of leadership alone. Leadership assumes a staff or group of people you work with—not students in a classroom. The model just did not fit.

Finally, I began to understand my problem. I was thinking too narrowly. The following quote from *The Fifth Discipline* helped me focus my errant thoughts. "Leader as teacher' is not about 'teaching' people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning, for everyone. Such leaders help people throughout the organization develop systematic understandings."<sup>1</sup> Applied more broadly, fostering learning can be encouraged in many types of situations and with many different groups—staff, students, faculty, colleagues, alumni, library users, members of the public.

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1. PETER SENGE, *THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE* 356 (1990).

With this broader focus in mind, in the balance of this chapter, three elements of fostering learning will be explored in an effort to explain the leader as teacher. What does the phrase "foster learning" really mean and why should any leader take the time to do this? Secondly, the characteristics needed by any leader who wishes to foster learning will be discussed. And finally, the opportunities that arise in libraries where the leader teacher can foster learning will be analyzed.

## Why Foster Learning?

There are many reasons why a leader should foster learning. Most importantly, leaders who foster learning empower their employees, their students, their colleagues. A popular book of the 1980s, *The Leadership Challenge*, defines the practice of enabling or empowering people as a commitment to "strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support."<sup>2</sup>

Many library directors or department heads feel they can only be the leader if they control everything. Let's face it—many of us are into control! We know how to do a specific job or task, and we assume that someone else is just not going to be able to do it as well. However, organizational success can often be attributed to relinquishing control. Giving power away indicates a level of trust and respect that is necessary for an effective and functional organization. Let others make important decisions. Give staff control over their day-to-day workflow. Let them decide what to do at 10 A.M. and what to do by 4 P.M. Be sure staff have appropriate training and education for the work you expect them to do. Building their skills will build their competence. Give staff important tasks—tasks that will make a difference in and to the services offered by your library. To feel valued, employees need to feel they have a stake in the outcome. An organization that fosters learning enables its employees to transcend daily affairs. A thank you to one library staff member is really a thank you to the entire library staff team!

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2. JAMES M. KOUZES & BARRY Z. POSNER, *THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE: HOW TO GET EXTRAORDINARY THINGS DONE IN ORGANIZATIONS* 18 (1987).

We can apply these same lessons in the classroom or in other teaching or mentoring situations. You can strengthen students—foster their learning—by giving some of the power traditionally held by the teacher away. Add interactive components to your classroom. Require students to be the teacher—Isn't that a great way to foster learning? Create opportunities for students to choose—a paper or a final for their last project; what time to take a break. Help students develop competence by helping them learn the skills and techniques that will make them successful. Assign important work to students—not just make-work. Have a purpose for all you ask them to do. And, most importantly, give feedback often so students have a roadmap for success.

A second reason a leader should foster learning is that it will help build a sense of common purpose. Building purpose is an educational process, whether it is in an organization or in a classroom. If you want your employees or students to meet the goals of your organization or the course, they must have this sense of common purpose. Why are we here doing this work? Building purpose is accomplished by promoting and protecting the values of the organization and by personalizing the organization.<sup>3</sup>

What goals does your organization aspire to reach? Even if your goals are clear, they will never be accomplished without a shared set of values. What do you value in the workplace or in the classroom? Respect? Hard work? Diversity? Curiosity? Flexibility? Humor? Excellent service? How do you as the leader promote and protect these values? What makes these values belong to each of the staff or each student? One thing that encourages shared values is for the leader to live those values which are most important. If hard work is a core value, the leader must be seen to work hard. Otherwise, why would anyone else bother to put in a real work week? If humor is valued in the workplace or the classroom, the leader needs to have a sense of humor. If respect is important, then the leader must show respect to everyone. In the value-setting arena, the leader must lead by example.

So be sure your employees and students know the goals of your organization or classroom as well as the core values upon which those goals rest. Seize and create opportunities to reinforce

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3. THOMAS J. PETERS & ROBERT H. WATERMAN JR., *IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE* 83 (1982).

the sense of shared or common purpose. Inclusion is the byword. Staff newsletters, potlucks, retreats, parties, sharing successes, cross-departmental training, and team projects all help create a sense of community and shared purpose. These activities can also help personalize an organization—make it a place where the values of the organization meet to achieve its aspirations.

There is a third reason to foster learning. When employees or students take charge of their own workday or classroom experience, they will improve their performance and the overall quality of the organizations' services will also improve. Most leaders want the quality of their services to be outstanding. But wanting this outcome and getting it can be two completely different things. The more learning is encouraged in your environment, the more likely outstanding service can be your byline.

A fourth reason for a leader to take the time to foster learning is to improve the profession. Whether you are trying to improve the skills of your staff, the legal research strategies of your students/associates/faculty/public, or working directly to increase the knowledge of your colleagues through teaching, presentations, workshops, or articles, the legal profession and the law librarianship profession will both be better for it. And when legal researchers find the information they need in less time because of a legal research guide or get the exact piece of information they need to solve a client's problem, the quality of justice improves for individuals, for our society, and for our way of life.

## Characteristics of a Leader Teacher

So, what does it take to be a leader teacher? If you are convinced that there are good reasons to foster learning, what skills and attributes do you need to strengthen people and enable them to act?

First and foremost, a leader teacher needs credibility. A leader cannot possibly foster a learning environment unless the leader is a life-long learner. A demonstrated commitment by the leader to learning new software, constantly changing search engine interfaces, or new or remodeled legal research tools can go a long way toward creating the credibility needed to foster learning by others. Leader teachers need the credibility that comes with the willingness to change and grow by staying current in their field.

Another skill that can help a leader foster a learning environment is great communication. Communication is the glue that can hold the fabric of the organization together. Recognizing that information needs to be shared and finding ways to share individual knowledge and expertise are crucial to a successful organization. Circulation staff who are the last to learn about some activity that means scores of lawyers will be in the library will not feel empowered or share a common purpose. They will be rightly annoyed that they were left out of the information loop.

A leader teacher must be a good listener. Leaders cannot foster a learning environment unless they listen to all the people around them. You cannot learn unless you listen—to colleagues, to students, to attorneys, to faculty, to library users, to scholarship, to developments in your field. You have to be open to new ideas, new policies, new people, new technologies.

Collaboration or sharing your knowledge and expertise is another skill needed by the leader teacher. Not only do you need to be open to learn new things, but you must help others learn new things as well. To foster an environment where sharing and collaboration are valued is to recognize that learning is a two-way street.

Trusting your colleagues is essential for the leader teacher. Without trust, there can be no empowerment of the people in your workplace; no delegation of the critical tasks that give people choice and help build competence. Trust is created through mutual respect, possessing the right skill sets, and a shared commitment to the organization's objectives. When staff perform the tasks that are asked and expected of them, and when they consistently handle projects, problems, and people in a timely and appropriate manner, the leader teacher can trust that the critical work of the organization is going to be done.

A skill for the leader who wishes to foster learning is the confidence to take risks. Risk-taking can be dangerous business. Changing policies, spending your reserves down to zero, canceling a standard research tool, hosting court opinions as an archives can all be complex decisions to make, and ones that may well have long-term, negative consequences. Learning creates change. And taking risks is one way to encourage new ideas, new services, new consequences. If you are a member of the risk-adverse population, think about using studies or pilot projects as a way to try out new policies, practices, and services. Testing a theory for a short term

often gives people the security of going back to the old way if the risk-taking behavior does not work.

## Opportunities to Foster Learning in Libraries

Many of us think only about the classroom as a place to foster learning. Classroom teaching is certainly the most traditional place in which learning takes place. However, we are thinking about leader teachers in a much too narrow sense if we limit our view to this perspective. You can be a leader teacher and never step foot in a classroom. Our organizations provide many opportunities to foster learning.

One of the best (and inexpensive to implement) opportunities all leaders have is to create a culture where people are encouraged to ask the question, "Why do we do it that way?" The workplace environment must support the person who asks the Why question. These questions deserve a non-defensive response and appropriate consideration if alternative procedures or policies are suggested. "Questions concentrate the mind."<sup>4</sup> Questions make us think about things we do automatically—things we do because "we have always done them this way." There is nothing wrong with the past; it informs our future. But we need to use the past in a positive way. As the information world swirls around us, we may find that the reasons why we did things in the past are simply not relevant anymore and lead us to new policies and new procedures.

A note of caution must be added here. Change just for the sake of change is not necessarily healthy for an organization or its employees. All of us need some security in our lives—some things we know how to do well, some building blocks for the future. Changing everything all the time causes unnecessary stress and reduces efficiency and productivity as everyone tries to learn the new procedures. So the pace of change in any organization is very important. Asking the why questions is bound to lead to some changes, so it is important to recognize and embrace the consequences of this strategy. A learning environment is not fostered

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4. KOUZES & POSNER, *supra* note 2, at 226.

by encouraging the why questions and then always reacting in a negative way when new ideas are the result.

Another strategy that embraces the concept of fostering learning is to ask, "What are we doing well today that we don't need to do at all?" This is a little like the why questions except that it assumes change—this question assumes that you will stop doing something that you have been doing. It is also a hard question to respond to. What we are doing well, most of us want to keep doing! The tension here is the same as that noted above—the tension between the right amount of change at the right pace and too much or too little change.

Leaders need to learn from other organizations and bring those ideas back to their own libraries. Visiting other law libraries while on vacation or business in other communities, attending workshops and other educational programs, serving as a member of an ABA Accreditation Site Evaluation team, and asking colleagues through e-mail or personal contact how they handle certain situations are all easy ways to show you are open to new ideas—new ways of doing things. If you as the leader show this willingness to explore and change, your staff will understand that you value and embrace new ideas. Allow yourself to be taught by others. You will be creating an environment that fosters learning, for everyone.

Recognizing and using teachable moments with staff or faculty or students is another way for leader teachers to foster learning within their own organization. When you learn that a faculty member who is a heavy user of library services will be on leave, share this information with your public services and collection development teams.

When a faculty member you see in the elevator complains that they don't know how to find a state administrative regulation, tell them that you have been teaching some CLE workshops on using the Internet for legal research and that you would be happy to help them learn a couple of quick tricks for finding state regulations. If a student complains about the short library hours on Friday night, remind her that you did a survey that indicated less student interest in Friday night hours than any other day of the week and that with budget cuts coming up increased library hours are not likely. Or maybe you would decide to do another survey to see if the students have the same needs today as they did a few years

ago. At any rate, recognize these opportunities for what they are—a teaching moment.

Seek opportunities to help others in your organization understand the big picture. Peter Senge calls this the "systematic structures"<sup>5</sup> of an organization. The big picture includes "how different parts of the organization interact, how different situations parallel one another because of common underlying structures, how local actions have longer term and broader impacts than local actors often realize, and why certain operating policies are needed for the system as a whole."<sup>6</sup>

The systematic structures of an organization (the big picture) provide a model for thinking about classroom learning as well. I teach Advanced Legal Research for second- and third-year law students. Research tools, though changing daily, can often be explained by how various tools interact with each other, by how print and electronic tools are similar, by why the student who produces a poor search query may not get what she really wants, by why it is important to understand how the computer processes the words typed into the query box. This big picture analysis can help students understand context and permit them to fit the research tools into the larger landscape with better results.

Leaders also foster learning for others outside of their organization by sharing their expertise. This sharing can be done through presentations, articles, reports, and conversations with friends and colleagues. A leader teacher should not limit his influence to his organization alone. Our profession needs to foster learning as well. One way my staff and I at the Gallagher Law Library have been able to do this is through teaching and mentoring students in the Law Librarianship Program at the University of Washington's Information School. The students work in an intern program in the law library as they are earning their MLIS. Everyone here feels a responsibility to help the students learn what will be important to them in their new career. Whether we teach the students in the classroom, introduce them to neat research tools in the reference office, have them help define our periodical collection, review books donated by a retiring faculty member, set up a mock interview, or

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5. SENGE, *supra* note 1, at 353.

6. *See id.*

ask them to write a short article for the law school weekly newsletter, we foster the student's learning.

Even if you do not have a library school in your area, opportunities to recruit, mentor, and educate people about our profession abound. That law student you love who diligently works on the weekend and is curious about everything—suggest he get his MLIS. Refer him to the AALL Web page<sup>7</sup> to learn where library schools are located and which ones have a distance education program. This Web site also has some good information about the profession of law librarianship in general and can help prospective students understand admissions, financial aid, and other intricacies of going back to school. Or, as one law school does, pay tuition so the student can get his MLIS! Many excellent law librarians have worked in libraries as technicians or paraprofessionals. Take note of the staff you think would make great law librarians.

Help them learn about librarianship and encourage them to get their MLIS. Even if these students or staff decide not to further their education, they will be better employees by what you have helped them learn about the profession more broadly. You have helped foster a learning environment.

When new employees are hired, it is a perfect time for training that will make them productive in their work. It is also a great time to encourage the Why questions. New people often see old problems and other issues in a completely different light. That perspective can be encouraged from the beginning or discouraged as trouble-making. A library that values learning will encourage the questions and the new perspective.

Twice in the past three years, I have given a short course to my new staff (librarians and paraprofessionals alike) on legal research and legal materials. I spent about six hours in class helping them understand the different types of legal materials, the tremendous changes in format, citation format and purpose, the relationship of cases to statutes to regulations to constitutions, abbreviations, and other such basic information. The non-educated staff had a lot more initial knowledge about the legal system than I would have

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7. AALL Task Force on Law Librarianship Education, Education for a Career in Law Librarianship, available at <<http://www.aallnet.org/committee/tfedu/education.html>> (last visited Dec. 18, 2001).

expected. It was very interesting to incorporate this into the research tools they touch and many of us use every day.

## Conclusion

This short chapter has attempted to explain what it means to be a leader teacher. You do not have to be a classroom teacher to embrace this concept, though you certainly can be. You have read why you should foster a learning environment, been exposed to some characteristics you will need to refine or develop that will help you create an environment of learning, and explored opportunities that can be created to make learning actually happen. Every library manager has the ability to foster a learning environment where staff are enabled, given choices, and learn the goals and values of the organization. Experiment a little. The role of leader teacher can be fun and rewarding for everyone.