

ALSC President's Program

Grassroots Leader Librarianship

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I had never thought about being a leader of any sort. Leadership wasn't any part of my aspiration growing up. I come from a working-class family. Both my parents spent their childhoods running between shelters, away from the American airplanes dropping bombs on Japanese military bases in Taiwan. World War II interrupted their elementary education and thrust them into a life of blue-collar workforce long before they were ready for adulthood. While they cared about their children's education, the necessity to keep our family above the water meant that we the children had no role model for what career we could dream of and how far we could reach for our future.

I finished college out of sheer stubbornness and street smarts, and ended up working in a university library for four years. Even after I followed my spouse to Texas and became an accidental, reluctant immigrant, I thought it was enough to be a mediocre living an ordinary life. Being a new immigrant was hard enough given the tremendous language and cultural barriers.

And then I met an educator in my graduate study who told me with no nonsense that I should either start thinking for myself or forget about everything. Dr. Francis L. Miksa was my advisor and mentor who opened my eyes to a new world of possibilities. It's not good enough to know the answers, he said. It's not good enough to just practice what I had learned in classes. To be useful in my workplace and to the people around me, I must be able to question the status quo and to think outside the box. I also realized, in this learning process, that thinking and questioning weren't always a pleasant thing to do. More often than not, my questions or comments were met with blank stares or quick dismissal. One person even asked me why I didn't behave like all quiet Asians. It took me years to understand myself beyond the stereotype that I was assigned. There is the right way; there is the wrong way; and then there is always Ling Hwey. Most problems in real life do not have easy and clear solutions. The world is not black and white. It's often more realistic to look for the third way in the vast grey area and to consider tradeoffs among all possible options which fits best in a particular context. The same can be said how we see ourselves as library workers taking on leadership roles.

Traditionally, the definition of leadership implies a position of authority with power, occupied by someone who is experienced, with seniority, most likely a charismatic extrovert with commanding voice and physical attractiveness. The common perception also implies a top-down leadership model in which a leader is the helper who knows better than those being helped, who is a problem solver to rescue those with needs, and who has the magic bullet for difficult questions. The leader is in charge. The followers take instructions and wait for their turn to become leaders, one at a time.

I have been the director of Texas Woman's University School of Library and Information Studies since 2004 and was elected 2017–2018 president of Texas Library Association. Both positions are what most would call leadership positions although I have never felt the power of control in either position. What I had felt in these positions instead is a sense of responsibilities for the organization and the people who work with me. The burden of accountability to my superiors and our stakeholders for honesty and integrity is often what keeps me awake at night.

What I, and I suspect many of us, notice in real life is that, in many situations of our daily living, there may be a person in the official position of authority, but there is often an individual (sometimes more than one) in the group who seems to exude influence, serve as the magnet to gather the team members, and help with networking, organizing, nurturing, funding, motivating, or overall giving everyone the strength to move forward together. These individuals don't fit into the traditional top-down leadership



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model. They are in fact leaders on the ground who reflect a grassroots model of bottom-up leadership. Unlike the traditional definition of leadership, bottom-up leadership carries three prominent characteristics. The person is competent in a specialty area and has the capacity to exercise their own competencies. The person has strong core values that align with the mission of the group. And the person possesses networking and relationship-development capacity to build trust needed for the group mission.

A person usually earns a top-down leadership position through formal work structure of rewards, seniority, and promotion. Bottom-up leadership however requires self-motivation, caring for others, and passion for the community. Either way, leaders are not born. Leaders are learned. Every one of us can be grassroots leader library workers, whether we are supervisors of library operations or frontline storytellers in youth services.

The first step for us to become leader library workers on the ground is to possess professional knowledge and skills to competently perform library operations and provide services. But more important than that, we become grassroots leaders by developing our leadership capacity and anchoring our professional mission in the community. There is no leadership without community. There is no sense of community without engaging with diverse groups of people outside the library in the community, including the majority of residents who are not library users. We begin with the recognition that we ourselves are full members of the community, with ownership of the community and our vested interest in its success and future. We see our community as having diverse people and entities full of potential assets that can supplement our limited library resources. We discover the best of community history and culture, build community resources with the knowledge, skills, and passion of its members, and facilitate storytelling of community dreams and aspirations. We use information and communication technologies as the backbone infrastructure to facilitate positive changes in our community.¹

One of the most difficult lessons to learn in bottom-up leadership is that it is about facilitating, not about helping. It is about belonging to our own community, not about helping from outside. And it is about building together using collective resources in the community, not about distributing library resources to others. Grassroots leaders in libraries are not helpers and outside experts providing objective, neutral answers to questions from

inquirers in the community. The work of grassroots leaders in libraries is not about performing our library service transactions perfectly. Rather, it is about building long term relationships with one another in the community, being curious about the dreams and aspirations of others, and caring for their well-beings. A true leader also understands that caring for their community begins with caring for their own self. Caring for people with whom we come in contact means taking time, listening and collaborating to design solutions best for specific scenarios and contexts.

The fundamental principle of grassroots leader librarianship is the appreciative inquiry approach to believing that the community is full of individual and institutional assets and values that serve as the basis for continuous, positive, and sustainable community development.²

A grassroots leader library worker learns to ask questions that bring out the best of people and build trust. A leader library worker advocates for the whole community, not just those who visit the library. A leader library worker is sensitive to whose voice is missing and creates safe space for marginalized people to have their stories heard. A leader library worker facilitates connections between those with skills, knowledge, and passion, and those with needs, so that members of the community will be able to help each other using local resources right there in the community.

Grassroots leader librarianship is sustainable for the long run when every library leader on the ground practices a sense of personal and social responsibilities. These responsibilities include not only the consistently high quality of our library work but also lifelong continuous improvement in our own professional knowledge and skills, as well as deep commitment to growing the same grassroots leadership among others in the community. Leader library workers measure their accountability not by their service transactions at work but by the outcomes and impact evident in positive changes outside the library in the community.

I invite you to become a leader library worker on the ground to uplift your community. I very much look forward to joining a panel discussing leadership in librarianship as part of the 2023 ALSC Charlemae Rollins President's Program at the ALA Annual Conference on Monday, June 26, 2023, and am grateful for the support made possible through the ALSC endowments. &

References

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2. D. L. Cooperrider and D. Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).