
I'm a Chair, but I Feel Like a Folding Chair

*How RUSA Can
Help Develop Your
Leadership Skills*

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I have had a lot on my mind lately, with the ALA Annual Conference and the start of my year as RUSA president. But what I have been thinking about the most is leadership development and mentoring. There are things that all of us need throughout our careers, with different needs at different points along the way. In my experience, two of the best things about being part of a professional organization are meeting people who have become my mentors and developing as a leader. My mentors have helped me to develop as a leader, so this quarter's column is about both.

FROM FOLDING CHAIRS TO STEADY LEADERS

As I was starting to think about this column, a RUSA member popped up online to chat with me and said "Can I talk to you about RUSA? I am a chair, but sometimes I feel like a folding chair." We talked and I offered some advice. I had been thinking about leadership development for months, but "folding chair" really brought around how we all feel sometimes. How leadership really is a challenge, how we can feel isolated and adrift as chairs, as librarians, even as committee members—which is by definition being part of a group. RUSA, the library profession, our workplaces, should all be communities, but sometimes we see leadership as a solo act. If we need help figuring things out, are we good leaders? The answer, clearly, is yes. The challenge for RUSA is how to make sure that our members feel that they have the support to develop as leaders within the organization, in their workplaces, and in the profession.

In case you are thinking, "but I don't want to be a leader; that just isn't me. I think I'll stop reading," I am going to share a couple of stories about my grandfather. He used to tell me "we can't all be Captains." He never sought leadership positions, but other people sought his advice and leaned on his strength and kindness. He wrote home from basic training during WWII, "They (the other enlistees) made me team leader for exercises, I guess no one else wanted it." Leadership is not a title, it is an attribute. You do not have to be bold or extroverted. There is no one set of traits that makes a leader. You do not even really have to want it. If you do what you do well, others might want you to do more of it. You can always decline to lead, but likely you are now—or one day will be—more of a leader than you intended.

MENTORSHIP AS A MUTUAL BENEFIT

After the “folding chair” discussion, I have a new mentee. It has been really a great thing for me. It seems like a good thing for her, too. The reason that it is great for me is that I have been on sabbatical and away from the graduate assistants whom I usually mentor. Having a new mentee has given me back that role and I feel like my experience and wisdom (ahem) are of some use on a personal level. Why should you be a mentor? There is the desire to “give back” or “pay forward” the kindnesses and advice that helped you. There is the desire to shape a future career. There is the desire to help someone work through a problem with a committee or in his or her career and know that you were part of that. It also is just nice to feel useful outside of the workplace and to be useful for what we know and who we are.

My RUSA mentors are why I got involved in RUSA rather than some other organization within ALA or my state. Perhaps some of them were examples rather than mentors, people I wanted to emulate more than have a personal relationship with. Observation and reflection are one way to improve your own leadership skills. Mentors were able to answer questions and to help me with problems, and they were there for me to bounce ideas off.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AS A CAREER-LONG PROCESS

If you have stopped developing as a leader, it is time for a new career. If you have not started to develop as a leader, maybe it is time for that challenge. We encounter leadership opportunities in our jobs, even when we do not have an administrative title. It can be leading a project, chairing a committee, leading a rudderless committee or workgroup, or stepping up to fill a temporary leadership vacancy. People in middle levels of their organization are often caught in the leadership-without-a-title area or have leadership without final authority. We often refer to this as “servant leadership.”¹

When we are passionate about something, we tend to step into leadership roles, even if we did not intend to do so. Some people seek out being a chair; some people come to it by accident. Either way, the first time you take on a leadership role, you are likely not prepared. My first committee in RUSA was also my first chairship. I attended the committee as a guest. As I recall, the chair was unable to attend and the committee sat around silently thinking about the agenda item of what to do for the next year. As one uncomfortable with silence, I offered a choice of two frameworks: we could write our ideas on pieces of paper, one person could read them, and we could discuss them, or people could verbally share their ideas, someone could write them on the handy flip chart, and we could discuss. The heretofore-silent group vocally opted for sharing ideas aloud and we left the meeting with a plan for the coming year. I was made chair after one year on the committee.

I wouldn't say I knew what I was doing with that first committee. I was flying by the seat of my pants. I was new to RUSA, and almost as new a librarian. It may have helped that I was also chairing a very important committee at work, but frankly, I knew even less about how to lead the OPAC interface team, which was handling some contentious issues. I floundered a bit, both in RUSA and at work. I believe that the RUSA committee held a program, but it has been so many years and so many committees ago. I do remember that I assessed that I was great at meetings but not so good at keeping things moving between meetings; another common problem for chairs. But I did have a conscientious committee member who agreed to co-chair, and together we made a more effective team. I learned as a leader assess my weaknesses and to ask for help.

BECOMING A THREE-LEGGED STOOL: YOU, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, AND MENTORING

Perhaps this is a terrible metaphor because no one wants to be thought of as a “stool.” Being a stool in the way that I mean it is a good thing: a stool has three legs, which make it the most stable of seating options. If you are one leg of the stool called RUSA Leadership, the other two are *leadership development* and *mentoring*. So, stay with me.

You. You bring to RUSA your personality and the skills that you use in your daily work. You might bring leadership skills from a previous career (I recently reminded a mentee that she did have supervision skills because she had been a call center manager for years before getting her MLS). You might also be active in other organizations professionally or within your community. So, you might have some experience as a leader or you might not. Even with some leadership experience, we often feel like we do not have as much as we need.

Sometime people talk about “born leaders,” and I am sure that they exist, but I was not one of them. I was a mousy and bossy child, which is not a good leadership combination. I am no longer a wallflower, and I have gone from bossy to a little hesitant to ask people to do things. Yet here I am, writing this column because of a leadership position. Somewhere along the way I started to figure out how to lead. My point is that there are probably few “born leaders” who didn't have to put thought and effort into how they develop as a leader. This is where RUSA can help.

Leadership Development is the second leg in my leader-as-stool analogy. Committees within RUSA and the Sections are a great opportunity to develop as a leader (spoiler alert for my Winter column: I put out encouragement to volunteer). Not all RUSA members are on committees or want to be on committees. There are different reasons for being a member of an organization. I am part of other ALA groups where I receive online newsletters, journals, and am on discussion lists but do not participate. A lot of leadership development happens through active participation on committees, but RUSA

will be offering leadership development opportunities for members who are not on committees. By the way, if you are thinking, "I would like to be on a committee but I can't come to conference," we have many opportunities, particularly in our Sections.² If you want to develop as a leader, participating in a committee is a good starting place. Moving on to chair a committee will stretch your skills even more and probably help you in your job.

We learn through our experiences. Being on a committee or chairing a committee only gets you so far as a leader. The person who admitted to "feeling like a folding chair" was already a committee member and already had substantial leadership experience outside of RUSA. Knowing what to do in a particular organization is fundamental to being a successful leader in that setting. Sometimes in our workplace we hire people who were good leaders elsewhere but do not thrive because the new setting has a different culture and set of procedures.

RUSA has orientation for our committee chairs, which focuses on deadlines and procedures. This year I will be expanding the orientation to include some information on running an effective meeting, keeping volunteers motivated between meetings, setting committee goals, and what to do if you are feeling like a folding chair. I think this will be helpful to most people in their jobs, so I am working on making this content into a series of discussions or webinars that can reach more members. I could use some assistance with this, so if you have ideas or can help train leaders, please email me.

Different people have different learning styles, and some people learn best through reading, or reading and discussing. We will be starting a leadership reading group this year. As I am writing this column a couple of months before you are reading it, not all of the details are in place (like a schedule and the readings). Look for an announcement about it on the RUSA website. The readings will be chosen to help with volunteer work and your workplace, so this is open to all RUSA members.

As part of my RUSA presidency, I am holding weekly office hours 2–3 p.m. central standard time in Adobe Connect. One hour each week I, and frequently a RUSA staff member, will be available to answer your RUSA questions and talk about your RUSA ideas. The times will be announced through the RUSA webpage, RUSA Twitter stream, RUSA-L, and Facebook. The announcements will also include my phone number for those who would rather call than chat online. I will also be promoting this as a "work sprint" for RUSA. It is easy to let volunteer work fall to the bottom of our priorities, but in one hour per week a committee or an individual can accomplish an amazing amount.

There are other ideas being talked about right now, such as a leadership preconference, so keep your eyes open and read the emails that come from RUSA. Subscribe to RUSA-L and your section discussion lists if you haven't already. Those can be a good place to ask questions and share ideas as well as to get information about opportunities and events.

I also want to hear from you about what you would like

RUSA to offer in the area of leadership development. We are always looking for creative approaches and ideas from members; you can then be part of the team working on it or just request that RUSA consider it as something that we find other people to develop.

Mentorship is the third leg of the stool that keeps the leader steady. We all need other people in our lives to keep us balanced. Professionally, we are likely to have people we turn to in various situations. RUSA should be no exception, and it is a great place to find or be a mentor. Mentor relationships formed through RUSA are likely to start by focusing on your role within RUSA, but they may expand to guidance in other aspects of your career and worklife. I have mentored and been mentored by fellow members on committee work, being a better committee chair, career concerns, and workplace personnel and organizational challenges. Each mentoring relationship's development depends on the people involved. This is both the strength and challenge of forming these relationships.

There are formal mentoring programs throughout ALA, such as the NMRT mentoring program. Mentoring programs tend to be seen as something for people new to the profession. As mentioned before, we all need mentors at different stages because there are always new challenges. One of my mentees is also an NMRT mentor. Within RUSA, we should mentor to the middle as well as mentor to the new. To start the mentoring initiative, my proposal is to form a core of members, long-time RUSA members and those with longer careers, who will mentor our RUSA chairs and mid-career members. This latter group would then provide mentorship to newer members.

Formal programs are one way to meet mentors, but they can require a lot of coordination. They have the additional overhead of a database or website and forms to fill out. To get us started, I am encouraging RUSA members to embrace being both a mentor and mentee and to form those relationships without a formal structure. Introduce yourself to a new person or five at the next RUSA social event. Spend a few minutes and exchange cards. If you seem to get along, follow up with an email. Either person can start this mentoring relationship. You need not be in the same type of library or same area of librarianship. One of the strengths of RUSA is the opportunity to meet with and learn from librarians from other types of libraries. The perspectives can be enlightening, and talking to someone further from your situation can be helpful both for personal development and to bring new ideas into your library. Through RUSA, I have met and worked with librarians that I would have never met through other associations or groups. That attracted me to, and keeps me involved with, RUSA. Many of our members say the same thing, so use this to your advantage. I have a mentee who is in a public library. I have mentors who are not reference librarians. You should be at different places in your career or involvement with RUSA and find it easy to communicate. It is possible that you will find likeness in library type or field of work to make interaction easier, but I do not think that it is necessary.

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

If you do not attend ALA conferences, it can be more difficult to meet people to form mentor relationships. The above mentioned book discussion could be a good place to meet people. Section activities, such as CODES Conversations, are good places to learn, discuss, and get to know something about your fellow RUSA members. Webinars and online discussions are the same. If someone asks a question or shares an idea that you find interesting, send an email saying “hey, what you said was interesting” or use the private-chat function in Adobe Connect to do the same. Say a little bit (not a torrent) about your job and your RUSA involvement. Ask a question or two about that person. See what evolves. Do not be discouraged about mentoring in general if you do not get a response or if not every contact you make becomes a mentor or a mentee. First, you have to get to know people. In mentoring, as in life, not every match is a good one. People may be too busy, or there just might not be a mentor connection. You might end up with a friend but not a mentor because you find that you are both at the same place in your careers, and that is not such a bad thing either.

Please be sure to see the RUSA blog (<http://rusa.ala.org/blog>) for a companion piece by Nicolette Warisse-Sosulski on what it means to be a mentee and the value of the relationship.

IN SUMMARY

To grow as a RUSA leader:

- Volunteer for a committee within RUSA and our great Sections.
- Look for announcements on RUSA-L and the section discussion list (and our Facebook page and Twitter) for opportunities for short-term volunteer opportunities (micro-volunteering) as well as task forces and other ways to be involved.
- Drop in to my weekly office hours to ask questions and share ideas.
- Attend our chairs’ orientation.

- Look for webinars, preconferences, and other RUSA events focused on leadership development.
- Find and mentor or be a mentor—or both.

To find a mentor:

- Attend RUSA events (especially social events) at the ALA Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting and introduce yourself to new people.
- Find RUSA mentors through online RUSA activities such as webinars and discussions: who said something interesting or asked a good question?
- Sign up for RUSA-L and Section lists and see who posts something that catches your eye.
- Research your potential mentor.
- Send an email, start a chat, make contact.
- Try again if the first person you contact is not a good fit.

To be a mentor:

- Attend RUSA events (especially social events) at the ALA Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting and introduce yourself to new people.
- Be open to people contacting you.
- Notice people on email lists and committees, reach out to be a mentor.
- Schedule regular times to talk, chat, or email. Help keep a conversation going.
- Subscribe to RUSA-L and Section lists to stay aware of mentoring opportunities.

References

1. To explore the concept of servant leadership, see the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, www.greenleaf.org.
2. If you are not familiar with RUSA, our sections are BRASS (Business Reference Services), CODES (Collection Development), HS (History), RSS (Reference Services), MARS-ETS (Emerging Technologies), and STARS (Strengthening and Transforming Resources Sharing).