
Catching On *Management Training in Depository Libraries*

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to
Marianne Ryan, Associate University Librarian for Public Services, Northwestern University Library, 1970 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208; e-mail: marianne-ryan@northwestern.edu.

In July, Chicago Cubs manager Lou Piniella announced that he would retire from his position at the end of the current baseball season. Although the season didn't end until October and spring training doesn't start until February of next year, there was immediate buzz and much speculation about who would be the next skipper of the storied franchise. It is never too early to start looking for a good manager.

Before settling on interim manager Mike Quade to take the full-time job, many names were suggested to be the team's next leader. Two of the top candidates were Bob Brenly, who led the Arizona Diamondbacks to a World Series title in 2001, and Joe Girardi, who took the Yankees to a World Series championship last year. Brenly is currently a well-respected analyst for the Cubs' on-air broadcasting team, while Girardi played with the Cubs from 1989–92 and again from 2000–2002. But apart from their obvious managerial success, it's not their connections to the Cubs that have their names among the frontrunners—it's the fact that when they were active players, they both were catchers. Catchers are viewed as the lynchpins of the baseball diamond. From their unique vantage point behind the plate, they are able to size up everything that happens on the field: where everyone on the team is positioned, what's going on in each of the dugouts, where the umpires are situated, what the baseline coaches are up to, and whether there's activity in the bullpens. They also call the games, signaling the pitcher what pitches to throw to whom. Based on how the game plays out, they adjust, re-adjust, and recommend adjustments. An astute catcher will suggest fine-tuning that allows the other specialized position players to perform like a well-oiled machine. They can keep an eye on the fans as well. They see and do it all.

Catchers themselves are specialists, too; their position is considered the most difficult and grueling to play. Often they are converted to play other positions. Because of their inherent versatility and their required relationship with everyone else on the team, it's no surprise that there's a preponderance of catchers-turned-managers in Major League Baseball (MLB). In the first eighty years of the twentieth century, 21.6 percent of MLB managers once were catchers.¹ Three of the five new managers hired in 2008 had previously played that position. Of the four teams left standing in the 2009 postseason, three were managed by former catchers. Forty percent of current MLB managers were career catchers. As Nalbantian and Guzzo note, it can't be by accident that such a disproportionate number of MLB managers were catchers. There appears to be something in that job that provides broader perspective by linking the individual more fully to the organization.²

What does this have to do with libraries? As in baseball, libraries are always looking for good managers. The broad skill set and range of experience needed by administrators are often cultivated by holding a variety of positions at a number of different institutions, most often on a track that primarily focuses on either public services, technical services, collections, or sometimes IT work, the separate areas of operation that inform many libraries. But, also like baseball, there might be a single area of library expertise that lets practitioners see and do it all. A “catcher’s background” would prepare a librarian to take on the challenges of managing at the senior level before actually reaching it. Such a background would transcend divisions and offer potential for a different kind of leadership.

Numerous libraries of all types and sizes—currently, nearly 1250—participate in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), a network coordinated by the United States Government Printing Office (GPO).³ Depository libraries select and receive a range of content in an array of subject areas in both hard and electronic formats at no cost in exchange for making the information freely available to library users, including the general public. By design, such libraries never stand alone; they exist within a larger, parent institution. As such, each functions as “a library within a library,”⁴ responsible for all aspects of library operations and services. Depository libraries handle acquisitions, collection management, bibliographic control, research and information services, instruction and outreach, preservation, and systems work. Many offer specialized services, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), data services, or digitization support. They market their services to a range of stakeholders; they also must collaborate with staff and departments elsewhere in the library. As with the catcher on the field, it is incumbent on staff in the depository to ensure that all the diverse elements function together to provide optimal performance and service. Additionally, the workings of the depository must be coordinated throughout the broader organization, especially in cases where functions such as cataloging and IT are shared. Thus it’s critical that the depository library’s staff view the library holistically, recognize what needs to be done, and build relationships to make it happen. Throw in the requirements to supervise personnel, oversee equipment and facilities, and manage a budget, and a depository library becomes a particularly valuable proving ground for broader managerial responsibilities.

In the depository library, one must be a jack-of-all-trades, but also a master of many—like a catcher, both a generalist and a specialist. Working in the depository context provides a depth of experience and a breadth of perspective ideal for taking on library leadership challenges. As a veteran of the depository experience, I know that I gained a better understanding of how libraries work as a whole—while employed as a new librarian in a depository library—than I could have anywhere else in the institution. Later, most of my early work life was spent at academic institutions that supported regional depositories—those

complete, comprehensive, archival collections—and housed graduate schools of library and information science (or their subsequent iterations). That meant there was always a crop of aspiring practitioners seeking work in the library. In recruiting students to work in the depository environment, my pitch was that the experience they would gain would allow them to go anywhere or do anything because it would be so eclectic and multifaceted. That wasn’t a bill of goods. In addition to its academic library contributions, a depository in that environment functions as part public library (through its service to the citizenry), part archives (through its collection retention), and part special library (by acquiring multidisciplinary legacy materials). So almost without exception, those depository-trained students immediately found jobs after graduation, and not just in other depository libraries. With a combination of general experience and specialized training that was recognized as valuable by prospective employers, they literally veered into every type of library and all walks of the profession.

I now watch with interest as many libraries scale back federal depository operations: collection size reduced, staffing cut, depository status relinquished. The rationale is often that an increasing amount of government information is available online and that materials are declining in use. When this happens, it seems that staff are often reassigned to other departments in the library. Many affiliate with the reference department, where they generally continue to handle the government information queries that other staff may feel uncomfortable tackling; they also ably take care of questions in specific disciplinary areas. Some join the instruction and outreach department, or the social science collection team, working in areas they previously collaborated with. Others go to support IT, since working in a depository library hones those skills as well. One institution I know of offered its depository librarian a chance to oversee a campus branch library, recognizing that the range of her experience had groomed her for new opportunities. Perhaps a question worth asking is why it seems more the exception than the rule that depository librarians are tapped to take on fuller middle-management responsibilities. More organizations can benefit from deploying the expertise of their depository staff throughout the broader organization.

Despite the perceived wane of depository libraries, working in them remains a strategically sound choice. They provide limitless possibilities for engaging in all aspects of library work, interacting with staff from throughout the library and from other depositories in the FDLP community, and understanding the information needs of a diverse customer base. There’s no part of the larger library endeavor that isn’t mirrored by the depository library experience. By being exposed to the big picture but also being in the weeds, depository librarians experience a ready-made training plan for roles in library management and administration.

As an aside, recent data shows that the use of government information resources is actually on the rise.⁵ The reasons for this possible up-tick is a topic for another day, but anecdotally

I can certify that depository library users realize there's no topic you can't find government information on. And, thankfully, that includes baseball.

References

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