



“I have also learned that good leaders always give other potential leaders a second chance.”

Leadership Suits Me

MARK RAY

I never imagined I'd be in a corner office, serving as a chief digital officer for Vancouver Public Schools and semiregularly wearing a jacket and tie.

As someone who began his career in a small elementary school as a teacher librarian to overseeing technology for a district serving 23,000 students, I've definitely changed some lanes over the past several decades. That said, I actually began my days as a teacher librarian wearing a suit.

My day job during library studies at Portland State University was selling women's shoes at a now-defunct department store. Thanks to savvy forays to thrift shops, I owned a rather natty array of designer suits. When I transitioned to a job as elementary librarian at Hough Elementary School in 1992, I figured there was no harm in projecting a professional appearance in my role as an information professional. For the first several weeks at my new position, I blithely wore Italian suits, while reading Chris Van Allsburg books to elementary students, most who qualified for free breakfast and lunches.

While elementary students likely don't understand the concept of cognitive dissonance, I'm reasonably certain that students and staff agreed that Mr. Ray didn't look like the previous librarian . . . or perhaps like any teacher librarian that they'd ever seen before. I learned recently that the school secretary commented to colleagues that “the new librarian carries a purse!” (It was, in fact, a briefcase.) In retrospect, that dissonance and a penchant for unusual clothing seem to be recurring themes in my professional life.

My sartorial statements soon met reality. I remember the Friday I first had kindergarteners in the library. I didn't sleep the night before. I was petrified of the uncertainty of 5-year-olds. Wearing a lovely tan Armani suit, I hunkered down for story time. All went reasonably well, and at the end of one of the lessons, a wonderfully sticky child gave me a hug. Welcome to elementary librarianship, Mr.

Ray. Recognizing that dry-cleaning bills would soon ruin me, I transitioned to more washable items.

WHAT OTHERS SEE

For the next 20 years, I worked as a teacher librarian in elementary, middle, and high schools. While my clothing choices transitioned to more casual wear, I have always been conscious about how I looked to students, teachers, and administrators. Whether it was due to my days selling shoes, my father's guidance to me as a teacher, or taking heed of professor Dr. Joyce Petrie's focus on managing how others see you as a librarian, I have always been attuned to brand. I've recognized (and operationalized) that the perceptions of others largely determine my destiny as a professional. As I transitioned to district leadership, this became even more evident. I watched as perceptions empowered or stifled careers—they strengthened or weakened positional power. And perceptions either created or diminished opportunities.

As a former advocacy columnist for *Teacher Librarian*, I often wrote about library brand as a core component of

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librarianship. In my presentations and workshops in the past several years, I often quote a well-worn phrase that *brand is not what you see, but what others see*. Speaking from experience both as a teacher librarian and as a district leader, you are what others think you are. I’m going to rephrase that for emphasis: if others do not see you as likeable, credible, collaborative, trustworthy, etc., then you are *not* those things to others—even if you think you are.

This is a significant leadership challenge for teacher librarians. Due to limited feedback from peers and supervisors, the uniqueness of the teacher librarian job, and the ability of librarians to rule a library kingdom largely of their own making, many librarians do not realize that leading a library program is not the same as effective educational leadership. After 5 years as a district leader, I have learned that leadership beyond the library requires a very different skill set. Here are a few lessons I’ve learned that can help build skills and brand as a leader.

COLLABORATING LEADERSHIP

Powerful and effective leaders share

leadership with others. As someone charged with effectively implementing 1:1 iPads to schools in my district, I relied on both the expertise and leadership of many others, including our network staff, instructional coaches, teacher librarians, principals, paraprofessionals, and more. Put simply, I didn’t know everything and couldn’t do everything. It required me to trust, collaborate, and delegate. Our network team focused on device configuration and management; instructional coaches zeroed in on professional learning; and teacher librarians and paraprofessionals took the lead with deployment, circulation, and troubleshooting. Leadership means trusting (and accepting) a team effort.

As a teacher librarian, I regularly collaborated and delegated with library clerks, often deferring to them authority and leadership roles which initially surprised them. But I was a disorganized librarian. There. I said it. When it came to operations and organization, I tapped their thinking and leadership, recognizing I had different skills to offer. I also collaborated with classroom teachers, recognizing that their content or grade expertise exceeded my own.

(Recall my fear of kindergarteners.) When I worked together with teachers, it was from a position of shared expertise and ownership. While I often initiated the idea, I engaged them in the process of translating that idea into a workable plan, often changing it significantly after discussion. In one case, I taught students (and the teacher) how to use Google Docs while the teacher simultaneously taught the content as part of a collaborative American history research project.

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES (AND SUCCESSES)

Make an educational (and educated) hypothesis, implement with confidence, then learn from mistakes. In a position of leadership, one rarely has the luxury of waiting for “perfect”—decisions need to be made and plans implemented. As an administrator, I learned to utilize an after-action review process as either an implicit or explicit part of my work. After a project or task, I often worked with the team to learn and improve. Whether it was after deploying thousands of iPads across multiple schools or reflecting on a day-long workshop, I asked some core questions:

1. What was expected to happen?
2. What actually occurred?
3. What went well and why?
4. What can be improved and how?

In a formal after action review, representatives from all aspects of the project are brought together to reflect on these questions. After our preliminary pilots of iPads in two selected schools, we engaged librarians, paraprofessionals, principals, students,

teachers, coaches, and our internal staff to assess what happened, what we learned, and how we could improve next time. This process occurred with each successive implementation, leading to innovations and changes that improved efficiency and effectiveness.

As a teacher librarian, I was reflective in my practice but didn't formally or regularly apply a feedback process like this to projects or programs in my library. While I was reflective on my lessons, changes to the library program didn't necessarily receive the same scrutiny. If I rearranged the furniture, purchased new resources, or implemented a new club, I didn't always hold it up to this kind of evaluation. And, in retrospect, that analysis would have been useful to improve, expand, or modify more of these program decisions. We often trust our anecdotal observations and forget that our brand is *their* perception, not ours!

SEEKING WIN-WINS

Success should be shared among stakeholders. My friend Ross Warner taught me this essential leadership lesson. As someone who has worked within both Japanese and Chinese professional cultures, he impressed upon me the need to find ways for all parties to be successful. This is different than a “zero-sum” scenario in which someone wins and someone loses. As a district leader, I cannot reasonably see success as competitive (although some administrators do). In working with other departments, buildings, and stakeholders, I have learned to perceive and understand what success looks like to others and then find ways to ensure projects meet their (and my) needs. As an example, our district is currently seeking to

implement computational thinking and making into our classrooms. Knowing that we will need willing building principals, librarians, and teachers, not to mention engagement with our curriculum teams focused on similar goals, the vision and design of this plan for the coming year will begin by having these parties at the table when the plan is *developed*, not merely when the plan is put into action.

As a teacher librarian, I regularly collaborated with an English teacher who shared my love of cognitive dissonance. Together, we designed an English unit focused on the romantic era, which leveraged interest in vampire novels that were emerging in the mid-2000s. My goal was to promote reading beyond the then-gangbusters *Twilight* series. Her goal was to provide a cross-disciplinary study of the romantic era. Together we crafted a wonderful hot mess of lessons and activities that had us planning, teaching, and evaluating together.

In an example of district-level collaboration, I was able to link my school-level need to simplify my textbook processes with the chief technology officer's interest in automating textbook management across all secondary schools. One day, I got a call from the district chief technology officer, who heard I was trying to better manage textbooks. This cold call began a multiyear collaboration and partnership that resulted in a successful districtwide automation implementation, saving teacher librarians hours of work and the district hundreds of thousands of dollars.

CULTIVATING CULTURE

Culture defines organizational suc-

cess. Another powerful lesson learned as a district leader is an organizational change mantra: culture eats strategy for breakfast. This concept, often attributed to Peter Drucker, reflects organizational research that shows that—in the absence of shared understanding, values, and ownership—most change initiatives fail (as cited in Quote Investigator, n.d.). Too often, educational organizations impose new programs, adoptions, or business practices without authentically consulting and engaging those who will ultimately operationalize that work. This top-down approach to implementation will either fail or fall short of desired outcomes. Using the textbook automation example above, as a teacher librarian, I worked closely with district technology and curriculum staff, building new understandings and relationships quickly. I was not only given a seat at the table, but I also shared the seat at the front of the table with our chief technology officer. More importantly, my fellow teacher librarians were engaged from the beginning to help guide decisions, work out details of the implementation, and barcode and upload data.

While this could easily have been a top-down initiative, by leading and working collaboratively to build a supportive culture, it had both direct and indirect successes. The implementation was completed within a single summer with a high level of accuracy, allowing automated circulation to occur in the fall following the transition. Teacher librarians embraced (rather than endured) the transition and continued to suggest ways to improve the business practices to support the automation. When the financial savings started rolling in, librarians were part of this shared win. Most importantly,

it built new trust and rapport between teacher librarians and district curriculum and technology teams. As such, it began changing the climate and culture of our district, which has led to successes of teacher librarians in recent years.

LOOKING BACK/LOOKING FORWARD

Truth be told, I miss my libraries. I miss coaching tennis. And I miss working with kids. Nothing in administration effectively offsets those losses. Adults aren't as much fun as kids. My administrative colleagues are good people, but sometimes we have to make decisions and take actions that are not as good as they could be. Seeing the big picture is both a blessing and curse, but absolutely essential to good leadership.

This is perhaps a last lesson learned. As a teacher librarian, I was headstrong, idealistic, and often absolute in my beliefs and thinking. I often had the luxury of seeing things as black or white. I was and am not alone. I still have many librarian colleagues who share those attributes. More than once, I've heard librarians evoke "my way or the highway." And it defines the difference between leading *in* a library and leading *beyond* the library.

As a high school teacher librarian, I once sent a six-page screed to our district technology directors after they blocked Google image searching. As someone who later ended up leading such operations in the same district for 2 years, there are multiple layers of irony to this. Most obviously, I became the boss who I once railed against as a teacher librarian. As the boss, I have learned that most decisions are not black and white at all.

I have also learned that good leaders always give other potential leaders a second chance. The same chief technology officer who reached out to me to collaborate on the textbook automation project was one of the recipients of my six-page screed several years before. She let bygones be bygones and recognized the need for a win-win and to rebuild culture. Through our collaboration, we built trust, rapport, and friendship. And I believe this created the opportunity I had to later work in the same corner office. The other recipient was still a director of network operations when I became chief digital officer. For a while, I was his boss. Now, we work alongside each other as fellow directors. Together we have read and replied to other indignant emails from teacher librarians and educators. And we have more than once joked about "that Google thing."

REFERENCES

Quote Investigator (n.d.). *Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast*. Retrieved at <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/>

Mark Ray has given up the corner office and now serves as director of innovation and library services, still in Vancouver Public Schools. He now only wears jackets for school board presentations and when he has to meet with the superintendent. Ray also wears jackets when he presents as part of his work with Future Ready Librarians and other national initiatives. Most other times, he just misses getting hugs from kindergarteners.

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