TRANSFORMING INSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP: WHAT 2020 TAUGHT US ABOUT SUPPORTING THE WHOLE INSTRUCTION LIBRARIAN

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INTRODUCTION

2020 was one of the most challenging and traumatic years in recent history. Spanning across countless generations, the events that unfolded during those twelve months—as well as their repercussions—will not be soon forgotten. Libraries did not escape the effects of the year, and academic libraries experienced their ramifications firsthand. Due to the vast adjustments within higher education throughout and following 2020, it posits that library leadership and expectations—especially those of instruction and information literacy—are in need of a transformation. Only by supporting the whole instruction librarian through the trauma-informed care model will this transformation succeed and last.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP

Due to the varying nature of information literacy instruction across higher education, institutions, and libraries, the information literacy leadership role is difficult to define. Some leaders may hold the title of “Director” or “Head” of instruction; these titles are often accompanied by supervisory, authority, or management responsibilities. Alternatively, other leaders may hold titles such as “Coordinator” or “Lead Librarian” for instruction, usually lacking the authority or supervisory responsibilities but still holding distinction. Regardless of the leader’s title, the role retains the same general expectations. According to Clara S. Fowler and Scott Walter, the instructional leader “is now committed to systematic planning for an instructional program that must be effectively articulated across the academic program and coordinated with the efforts of complementary instructional initiatives originating from outside the library” (2003, p. 466), all while utilizing inherent skills consistent with management personnel.

The American Library Association provides countless resources and publications for creating, maintaining, and supporting an instruction program within academic libraries. Two such publications, “Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries” (2011) and “Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices: A Guideline” (2019), provide distinct goals, structure, and components of effective instruction programs. For any professional involved in information literacy instruction, such publications and resources are invaluable. However, what these publications lack is clear direction for the leaders of such programs. The publication “Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators: A Practical Guide” (American Library Association, 2008) fills this gap. Since its publication in 2008, the state of information literacy instruction has changed tremendously, necessitating a revision and update of such a guide (American Library Association, 2021). Additionally, while this publication directly addresses twelve separate proficiencies for instruction librarians and coordinators, it does not provide recommendations for developing these skills, much less how to support fellow instruction librarians through stressful or traumatic times—such as those experienced throughout 2020.
STRESS AND TRAUMA FROM 2020

The months of 2020 ransacked the planet as well as the health and well-being of its inhabitants. The global COVID-19 pandemic impacted the economies, politics, and wealth of nations. As positive cases and the death count increased, governments implemented lockdowns, panic ensued, and masks as well as social-distancing measures became commonplace. The murder of George Floyd by police sparked global protests and a reinvigorated support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Sternlicht, 2020). Climate change intensified wildfires across the planet and caused record-breaking Antarctic temperatures (Leonard & Freedman, 2020; Taylor, 2020). In the United States, the deaths of civil rights activist Representative John Lewis and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg rocked generations (Seelye 2020; Liptak, 2020). Harvey Weinstein was convicted and sentenced to prison (Dwyer, 2020), a landmark in MeToo movement. The presidential election rocked the world, with a historic win for President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris and unprecedented distrust in the election process (Balz, 2020).

With so much chaos, combined with constant change due to the pandemic, individuals consistently suffered from high levels of chronic stress which only progressed throughout the year. This chronic stress—along with the pressures of work and home life—manifested as trauma, often causing changes in their work ability. According to the Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative Workgroup of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (2014, p. 7)

Instruction librarians were not immune from this trauma and its effects. Since there has been very little change in global circumstances, influences on stress, or information literacy instruction expectations, it is time to change how instructional leaders serve instruction librarians and progress their information literacy programs.

POST-2020 APPROACHES TO INSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP

Trauma-Informed Care

Well established within the health care setting, trauma-informed care is an approach that recognizes how past trauma affects a person (Anonymous, 2018). While this past trauma can be unique to an individual or shared by a group, it can present in a multitude of ways. Due to the high number of public traumatic events throughout 2020, manifestations of these shared experiences most likely affect each librarian differently. Therefore, to serve and lead instruction librarians equitably, leaders should seek to recognize these manifestations and understand them among their fellow librarians.

According to trauma-informed care, this recognition and understanding is often accomplished by focusing on “the three E’s”: Events, Experiences, and Effects (Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative Workgroup, 2014). To understand how trauma is affecting an individual, the traumatic Events must be identified. The trauma manifestations rely upon an individual’s past Experiences, and thus directly informs the Effects of the trauma on the individual. Within academic libraries, this could take the shape of burnout, illness, absenteeism, passive aggression, loss of interest or passion, and more. In worse case scenarios, these trauma responses could lead to or further develop a dysfunctional or toxic workplace (Henry et al., 2018).

Recognition and understanding may be the first step according to trauma-informed care, but it should not be the only step leaders take to support their instruction librarians. It is equally important to resist any form of re-traumatization by creating and maintaining a trauma-informed workplace. These steps constitute parts of “the four R’s”: Realizing the impact of trauma, Recognizing the signs of trauma, Responding by creating a trauma-informed organization, and Resisting re-traumatization (Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative Workgroup, 2014). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a trauma-informed organization or workplace adheres to the following: provides a safe environment, ensures transparency and trust, provides peer support, supports collaboration, empowers individuals by supporting their voice and choices, and maintains a “sensitivity to cultural, historical, and gender issues” (Anonymous, 2018, p. 5; Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative Workgroup, 2014). In 2016, Christopher Menschner and Alexandra Maul outlined a number of ways to provide a safe environment for staff, separating recommendations into categories addressing the physical workplace and the social-emotional one (pp. 4-5). Options such as “maintaining communication that is consistent, open, respectful, and compassionate,” “keeping consistent schedules and procedures,” and “offering sufficient notices and preparation when changes are necessary” (Menschner & Maul, 2016, p. 5) are of potential interest to individuals leading instruction librarians.

Whole Person Support

Whole person support is known by many names, such as “whole person care”, “whole employee support”, or “whole-employee care.” While utilized or referenced in a number of fields and industries, it originated within the nursing and health science
fields as a model for patient care and employee support. Often, the model is established within an organization without being explicitly stated or defined. The main component of whole person support or care is acknowledging that people are multi-faceted individuals, rather than just the sum of their work or productivity.

In order to acknowledge the many facets or dimensions of an individual, a leader must first work to recognize the inputs—and not just the outputs—of their employee. Marty Martin describes these inputs as “drivers” and “drainers” in the life of an employee (2013, p. 10). These inputs could take the shape of children, spouses or partners, elderly parents, emotional, mental or physical health concerns, finances, and more. Any number of factors may drive or drain an employee and their work performance. The whole person support model acknowledges these inputs and paves the way for an environment of care for the whole employee.

According to Lucia Thornton, this model “helps us move beyond our cultural, religious, social, and economic differences and helps us perceive the inherent unity of life” (2013, p. 40). Without this focus on unity, the workplace lacks a sense of belonging—therefore decreasing job satisfaction. As leaders connect with individuals about their inputs, the workplace culture shifts from one focusing on productivity and output to one supporting employees as whole people. “[I]nteractions, work, and relationships begin to arise from a place of deep regard and reverence” (Thornton, 2013, p. 40). Only by utilizing the whole person support model can leaders truly boost collaboration, high performance, and the sense of true teamwork within the workplace.

Emotional Intelligence

The role of emotions in leadership cannot be overstated. “Emotional intelligence is what allows us to know and understand ourselves, control our actions, plan for the future, adapt to change, manage conflict, relate to and understand others, and build deep, meaningful relationships” (Martin, 2019, p. 1). There are several components of emotional intelligence (EI), which together form a solid foundation for the whole person support model discussed above, as well as leadership in general. Early definitions of EI list five components: self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating others, showing empathy, and staying connected (Goleman, 1998). Since this original definition, the five components have since transformed into four leadership competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002a). Regardless of the definition to which a leader prescribes, emotional intelligence cannot be ignored.

Not surprisingly, as a leader works to increase their level of emotional intelligence, their employees sense the change and follow suit. More importantly, as individuals work to increase their EI skills, the level of emotional intelligence of the team simultaneously increases (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002b). This naturally supports a workplace culture committed to supporting employees as whole people, however, this change must begin with the leader. Contrary to popular assumptions, EI is not an alternative or competing skillset to cognitive ability or trade skills (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002a). All are important, and in many cases necessary, for workplace success—although EI consistently improves profit and job satisfaction substantially more than cognitive or trade skills (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002a). Daniel Goleman, in collaboration with Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, and several others, has produced a vast collection of literature on the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership and teams (see Appendices A and B).

LOOKING AHEAD

2020 left nothing untouched—from shopping to politics. It is no surprise that higher education and libraries required moderation to ensure success. Since there is no guarantee that procedures will ever return to “normal”, it only makes sense that library instruction and information literacy education should permanently change with the times and environment. By adopting the trauma-informed care model, embracing whole person support, and boosting emotional intelligence, library instruction leaders will remain relevant and engaging among their followers. These models go beyond the consistent push for work-life balance by embracing the individuality of employees, acknowledging the traumatic experiences prevalent throughout 2020, and connecting with employees on a more personal and emotional level. As the world is recovering from one of the most challenging years in recent history, library leadership can boost employee engagement and job satisfaction by welcoming and building off these models, inciting systemic change throughout the field.

REFERENCES


Books to Support Leadership Change


Appendix B

Articles to Support Leadership Change


APPENDIX C

Web Resources to Support Leadership Change

