Lead, Follow, or Get out of the Way: A People-Centered Approach to Coordinating Library Instruction in Changing Times

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Stop me if you have heard this before—higher education is at a moment of seismic change. Teaching and learning are at inflection points. And academic libraries are at the front lines of this transformation.

Sound familiar?

While we have all experienced significant changes in our lives since March 2020, those of us in postsecondary education got on this roller-coaster-of-transformation long before then. In the United States, higher education faces consistent disinvestment, particularly at the state level; sky-rocketing costs and student debt; a shrinking pool of traditional students nationwide; and constant questions of its relevance. Academic libraries have been directly impacted by each of these issues, and academic librarians have lived out the adage about change being the only constant in our working lives for some time. But how can we approach library teaching and learning when the proverbial ground is constantly shifting underneath us?

I have found that using a people-centered perspective to frame instruction at my academic library helps me to effectively meet such challenges. In this article, I explore this philosophical orientation to instructional leadership, and I concretely define its core tenets in terms of three actions we can take to respond to our changing landscape while developing nimble, flexible approaches for the future. That is, we can lead, follow, or get out of the way.

First, some context: I have been the Coordinator of Library Instruction and Research Help at Oakland University, a R2 institution in metro Detroit, since August 2020. We have fourteen full-time faculty librarians, and our group has both a flat structure and high levels of individual autonomy. It is essential, then—not optional—that leaders build consensus and get buy-in. While I do not supervise full-time library faculty in my Coordinator role, I am the manager for three part-time faculty librarians, who hold the title of Instruction and Research Help (IRH) Librarians. These folks are professional librarians who can work no more than 26 hours each week; they provide the vast majority of our first-year instructional support and general research help. However, all library faculty also have some engagement in Instruction and/or Research Help, so both full-time library faculty and IRH Librarians are part of a working group focused on these services.

Since I assumed the Coordinator role in 2020, I have pursued a people-centered leadership approach with both my full-time library colleagues and the part-time faculty librarians whom I supervise. As such, I have had experiences where I needed to lead, follow, or get out of the way so that our services could evolve to most effectively serve our patrons' needs. While I focus on my experiences in coordinating library instruction in this article, the principles and examples I share can be applied by anyone engaged in teaching and learning.

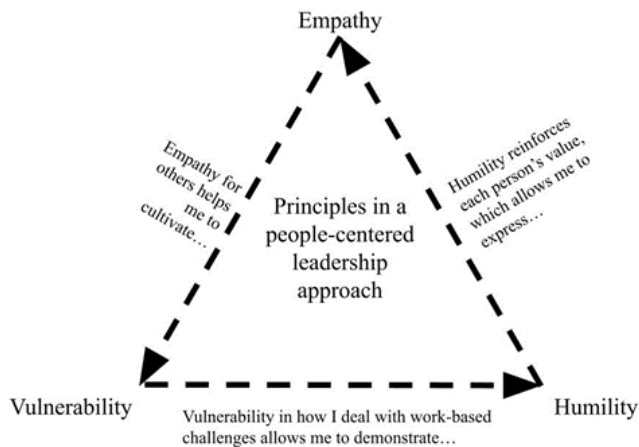## Defining People-Centered Leadership

People-centered leadership focuses on—you guessed it—people. It recognizes that the individuals who are engaged in the important instructional work are the critical components of accomplishing the mission-driven goals of our organization. My approach to people-centered leadership is grounded in three ideas:

1. **Empathy**, which means that I care for and about the people with whom I work, and I strive to understand that the dynamics within the working environment can impact individuals' abilities to do their best work (Josh Bersin Academy, 2022).

2. **Vulnerability**, which involves being comfortable with acknowledging my own failures, foibles, and fears – and facilitating in ways so that others can do the same (while still focusing on the work of our group). Vulnerability as a leader means taking informed risks, seeing challenges as opportunities for growth, and creating a shared culture that values learning over perfection.

3. **Humility**, which recognizes that every member of a team brings unique and meaningful value to the team's work, regardless of their role or status. For me, then, humility also means that my role as group leader does not make me more important or valuable; I can learn from others' perspectives and expertise.

While I came to this general leadership approach out of my own experiences, Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* (2018) named—and validated—these concepts. She uses different terminology, but the core ideas and values are the same. By working and leading with empathy, vulnerability, and humility, librarians who lead instructional programs or initiatives can create engaged and (to use Brown's term) daring teams that achieve great things.

The concepts of empathy, vulnerability, and humility exist in relation to, and relationship with, each other; I have illustrated these connections in Figure 1. Having and displaying empathy for my colleagues allows me to cultivate an environment where I—and others—can express vulnerability without fear or threat. Vulnerability—especially in acknowledging my own opportunities for learning and growth—allows me to then demonstrate humility with my colleagues. And having humility helps to reinforce each person's value to our shared work; seeing and acknowledging this intrinsic, individual value ensures that I am demonstrating empathy in my leadership.

Figure 1: The principles of my people-centered leadership approach in relation to each other

People-Centered Leadership, In Action

The title of this article presents three options for action, and we can intentionally connect the principles of people-centered leadership to those behaviors. Sometimes, we need to lead—and we can do that by having empathy as we create meaningful work environments. In other instances, we need to follow our colleagues; when we work alongside or in support of each other, we can display our vulnerability through learning and growth—and encourage others to do the same. And often, we need to show our humility by simply getting out of the way so that others can demonstrate their knowledge, capabilities, and unique value. In the following sections, I highlight a few ways that I have made these principles concrete in my own actions.

Leading – through Empathy

As the Coordinator of Instruction and Research Help, I have continually—and intentionally—sought to provide leadership through empathy. When I took on this role, it was restructured to include supervision of the IRH Librarians. Previously, these librarians had officially reported to library administration, but their day-to-day work was overseen by two different full-time faculty librarians who had coordinated Instruction and Research Services as separate entities. This structure was confusing and disjointed, and it did not provide a system in which the IRH Librarians could engage in meaningful work. In taking on this responsibility, I sought to create a working dynamic that offered clarity and support so that people could most effectively do their jobs.

I strived for this goal in several small ways. I ensured the IRH librarians' job description, which was long out-of-date, reflected the current nature of their work and better aligned their responsibilities with our organizational priorities. I also intentionally changed our language around these roles. IRH librarians had long been called "the part-timers" in conversation and documentation; while there is certainly nothing wrong with part-time or adjunct employment, there were no other instances within our organization where indi-

viduals were referred to by their employment classifications (e.g., casual employees, administrative professionals, full-timers). Moreover, past IRH Librarians, who held MLS (and often second Master's) degrees and were experienced librarians, expressed that they were often treated as interns or students rather than professional colleagues. In intentionally and consistently referring to these folks as the IRH Librarians, I sought to highlight their essential contributions to our Instruction and Research Help group while also reinforcing their status as professional librarians, not student employees.

Beyond my direct work with the IRH Librarians, I sought to build a broader group that acknowledged librarians' varying levels of engagement in and approaches to our Instruction and Research Help services. While our full-time library faculty maintain both functional and liaison responsibilities, their workloads vary; teaching and learning may be secondary responsibilities, and so whole-group discussions around first-year library instruction or research help service models may not be meaningful for everyone. Therefore, this past winter semester, I subdivided our group's work around four focus areas: our data- and statistics-gathering approach, first-year writing partnership, online learning objects, and research help services; I then asked each librarian to join the task-focused sub-team of their choice. Each sub-team worked together on a focus area and brought updates and recommendations to the broader group. While such a structure is not novel, it reframed how we engaged in Instruction and Research Help work, and it used librarians' time in more effective ways, thereby considering how work structures impact individuals' engagement. Moreover, we used this new approach to develop meaningful strategic directions for our first-year writing partnership, online learning objects, and research help service approach; I am confident that we would not have made such progress – or had broad librarian engagement—if we had worked as a single large group.

Following – using Vulnerability

In seeking to lead our Instruction and Research Help group with empathy, I sought to build an environment where we could explore new ideas and try different approaches while framing challenges as growth opportunities. From my perspective, my attitudes and actions would indicate to others whether our group was a safe space to learn from failure. Therefore, I leveraged areas where I had struggled as opportunities for our Instruction and Research Help offerings to grow in new directions.

For example, I had not been able to review and analyze our chat transcripts in any meaningful way since becoming the Coordinator of Instruction and Research Help. When I took on this role, I assumed duties that had previously been done by two full-time library colleagues while also continuing to serve as the liaison librarian for a large professional school. Although I kept trying to find time to tackle this important task, I had to admit to myself—and to the IRH Librarians—that there were only so many hours in the proverbial day. Nevertheless, I knew that a review and analysis of our chat interactions would help us to better serve our patrons. In acknowledging that I did not have space in my

current workload for it and that I needed to ask for help, I was able to ensure it happened. One of the IRH Librarians volunteered to analyze these transcripts as a long-term work project. Over the course of six months, she reviewed every chat-based interaction from March 2020-December 2021 for common questions, overarching themes, and opportunities where we could provide additional learning resources for our patrons. When this librarian shared her findings with the other IRH Librarians and me, we were impressed with both the depth of her efforts and the actionable takeaways she had identified. We used her efforts and guidance to collaboratively shape her recommendations into reality. If I had not acknowledged my own inability to tackle this project alone, we never would have been able to work as a team to develop both meaningful training tools for our librarians and learning resources for our patrons.

Getting Out of the Way – with Humility

The act of getting out of the way and letting someone else do the work—such a leader-like practice, right? Hear me out: sometimes it is the most leader-ly thing we can do. Here is where humility as leaders—acknowledging that everyone brings value to our team and services, and that even leaders are merely a part of the whole—is essential to fostering resilient and flexible library instruction. I have found that using empathy to inform our team's structures and using vulnerability to create environments where failures, foibles, and fears are opportunities to grow has helped me build environments where I can get out of the way and let other librarians lead our services in new, exciting directions.

In my experience, the clearest example of getting out of the way with humility centers on how others have led the transformation of our Research Help services. A sub-team of the Instruction and Research Help working group worked this past winter to develop recommendations about how we could reposition these services. At the end of the semester, they proposed that we reposition and reframe Research Help in strategic ways to highlight librarians' expertise. From that point onward, one of the IRH Librarians took these recommendations and made them reality—I simply got out of the way.

In the words of this librarian, "As a former children's librarian, the need to promote our services to the public was a necessity at the forefront of daily existence. Stepping into my new role I saw unutilized opportunities to expand the library's reach. As someone who loves to create, I jumped at the opportunity to be handed the reins to 'run with it.'" She independently created internal resources to help other librarians as they adjusted to new systems and processes, many of which required changing our mindsets about this service. Moreover, she used her experience in public libraries to work with an Oakland University student intern to develop a consistent "brand" for this service, social media content, and swag (bookmarks, stickers, badges, pens!). Her perspective allowed us to connect with our patrons through channels we had not previously explored. While I supported her work, I can say—with humility—that her approach to transforming broad recommendations into specific actions provided an

opportunity for my own personal learning and programmatic growth. Her work reinforced that there are many paths that lead to a successful outcome, and that stepping back to allow others' expertise to shine through can help to illuminate new ways forward.

Conclusion and Takeaways

While these people-centered leadership principles in practice are simple examples, they illustrate several core ideas that any instruction librarian can adopt, regardless of their position or circumstance. That is, we can all demonstrate empathy in how we lead, vulnerability in how we follow, and humility in remembering to get out of the way. We can practice these ideas regardless of the upheaval happening around us, or the format in which we find ourselves working, or the project on which we are focused. By using a people-centered lens to structure our work with instructional colleagues, supervisors, employees, graduate students, and others, we can focus on the human element, which is the one true constant in teaching and learning.

References

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