Amanda Clay Powers, Martin Garnar, and Dustin Fife

New academic library leader discussion series

Part three

Amanda Clay Powers (ACP), Martin Garnar (MG), and Dustin Fife (DF) are all relatively new library deans or directors. This series is their attempt to discuss the process of moving to a new library and becoming more than just a new manager, but truly a leader. In part three, Powers, Garnar, and Fife will explore some of the lessons they have learned. In part two, the authors focused on their first 100 days on the job and, in part one, they discussed finding their new jobs. Powers, Garnar, and Fife believe this open and honest conversation is essential to help prepare future library deans, directors, and leaders.

Authors (l to r): Amanda Clay Powers, Martin Garnar, and Dustin Fife.

ACP: For this last part let's look at lessons learned, and how they helped us develop as leaders. For Mississippi University for Women's (MUW) library, my first year tracked with some major initiatives. The final phase of our renovation happened and this included the construction of our automated storage and retrieval system, as well as the buildout of more than 43,000 square feet. I went from department head who rarely noticed a stain on the carpet to a library dean obsessed with every detail of a construction project. One of the most magical things that happened was watching the plans I'd poured over become three-dimensional realities. I learned so much about building collaborative relationships with everyone involved in construction, from the architects to the subcontractors. Clear and open (sometimes firm) communication with everyone was critical, and every detail mattered. By the grand opening, I was pretty certain I could try my hand at construction foreman, if library dean didn't work out. While preparing for and completing this renovation was a success with lots of its own lessons, it split my attention as I began my new job. At times there were so many urgent deadlines, I felt I

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was only able to focus on whatever was "on fire" at the moment. Assessing our strengths and goals up front, and then creating a six-month plan helped. Weekly staff meetings helped. Individual meetings helped. But I had some missteps. One small example: I called off decorating for the holidays because of construction, before I understood campus culture. I didn't realize it would affect morale. Keeping some kind of continuity in the middle of so much change would have been a much better choice. Definitely a lesson learned.

Martin and Dustin, what is a surprising new proficiency or lesson that you learned during your first year on the job?

MG: Looking back at my first year at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, one proficiency that I did not expect to develop quite so quickly was program planning. A few months after I started, the chancellor hosted an open forum to discuss the wave of protests on college campuses related to diversity and how our campus might be more proactive in addressing this issue. Attendees suggested that we should create a space for meaningful conversations on difficult topics, and the chancellor looked at me and said the library would be a great place to host them. I agreed and suddenly found myself in charge of setting up a series focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Though I had put on a few events in my last position, I had never tried to coordinate something campus-wide. With help from the chief diversity officer, I identified people likely to be interested in helping and put out a call for volunteers. Almost 60 people from across the university signed up, and within a couple of months (because nothing new can happen quickly), we kicked off the newly named Just Talk series with the first event at the library: a book group and discussion of Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Having committed to hosting or co-sponsoring at least one program a month, we explored numerous formats, including film screenings, special speakers, poetry readings, and small group discussions, all with a dialogue component to engage participants. In the first year, we had 20 events, and there have already been 19 events in the first half of year two. I had no idea that it would be so well-received, and I quickly became proficient in designing (and hanging) posters, figuring out the right amount of refreshments, juggling competing requests, and finding a consistent approach to moderating discussions on wide-ranging topics. Thanks to the success of the program, I was able to make the case for adding an administrative assistant, whose responsibilities would include (among other things) event planning and support. Though I've passed on much of the logistical work to the new person, I'm still pretty deft at knocking out a poster on short notice.

DF: There have been numerous surprising new skills, as Martin adroitly describes, but my main focus was not exactly new or unique. I have spent my entire first year at Western State Colorado University trying to say "yes." When team members presented new ideas, I worked to say "yes." When new partnerships or collaborations materialized on campus, I worked to say "yes." When administrators asked for last-minute research on a death-defying timeline, I worked to say "yes." Sometimes it took creativity and adjustments to get to "yes," and other times it took shifting workloads and priorities, but I have overwhelmingly gotten to "yes" this year. I understand that being part of a small and healthy institution allowed me to say "yes" as much as I have, but it was also a choice. As team members began to believe that I was open to new ideas, the floodgates opened to some of their best ideas. As campus organizations figured out that we were a willing partner, the library found itself engaged in new and exciting ways. As administrators recognized the expertise that we brought to our work for them, they seemed to trust us more in the work we did for everyone else. Saying "yes" was transformative for me, the library team, and our services.

Leadership can be about saying "no," and the realities of our institutions, especially with budgets and competing services, often dictate what is possible. But ask yourself, when have you said "no" when you could have said "20% yes" or "50% yes" or "90% yes"? When have you said "no" when you could have enabled a team member to find a different way to "yes"? Without a doubt, trying to say "yes" has been the most important thing I have done as a library director. It also makes it so much easier for everyone when you have to say "no".

ACP: Getting to "yes" is an ideal way to do this job. As a reference librarian, my goal was to never end an interaction with a "no." Getting to yes by consensus became central to my leadership style as I moved from reference into management roles. I take great pleasure in coming to a meeting with an idea, being challenged by my colleagues, and then leaving the room with an even better plan. Taking on this new position, I needed to bring a quickly evolving library online, integrating new technology and personnel along the way. I drafted a six-month plan and presented it to the faculty and staff hoping for that sort of discussion. You could hear a pin drop. I now know that everyone was so overwhelmed by new people, policies, procedures, resources, robots, and online services that it was impossible to know how to respond to me.

Focusing on empowering my faculty and staff turned out to be the key to fostering the kind of trust and engagement needed for consensus-building. In interviewing the staff on my arrival, it was clear that job descriptions, duties, and hopes for the future did not match up. We began clearing away obstacles so that each person could invest in the work they wanted to do and develop new expertise to bring back to the group. A library faculty member wanted do original cataloging and is now happily working through our backlog of theses. One processing assistant wanted more responsibility and training. She started with relevant webinars and ended up leading the item-level cataloging project to get all our serials into the robot. A serials assistant wanted nothing more than to do interlibrary loan, and now we have rave reviews about the customer service and speed at which orders are filled. Obviously, this strategy leaves holes in the workflow, so I've stepped in to take up slack and begun hiring. It takes time, but the benefit is that now we are all creating the library's new strategic plan together.

Martin and Dustin, what are your strategies for creating consensus around your leadership?

DF: I have had both success and failure with consensus-building. Sometimes, when I thought I was building consensus, I was in fact unknowingly exerting positional power. Often, even in meetings, I think aloud. This is something I have always done, and at times it can be useful. However, when you are leading a team, it can cause others to believe that you have strong opinions when you do not. This creates two situations that I would rather avoid. First, when I jump into a conversation too early, it can stifle the creative process. If you have positional power, your opinion can be given more credit than it deserves or than you want it to be given. If I speak up too early, consensus can unconsciously build around my position, regardless of my intentions. Second, if I articulate ideas haphazardly, people worry that I have already decided on a course of action, or might make a drastic change, when I am only brainstorming. Both of these situations have led me to reevaluate my process.

I have had more success with consensus-building by being radically honest about where I stand in any given situation. I do not pretend to build consensus. We have all worked for that person who pretends to want input. They actually already know what they are going to do, but act like there is an open process for discussion. If I am not actually open to input or feedback, I do not ask for it. When I am soliciting feedback, I often start by telling people where I stand. This can sound different depending on the situation: "I'm 90%

sure we are going to do this, but can you talk me out of it?" "I have no interest in idea X, but what am I missing?" "I have no idea what to think about problem Y, what would you all recommend?" When I openly and honestly ask for input, acknowledging where I stand, it spurs an honest dialogue. This has made my team willing to collaborate and openly share ideas with me. And though I say I do not seek input if I am not open to it, my door is always open, and team members often take advantage of that to give unsolicited feedback. I know some of the ideas I have shared throughout these articles seem to contradict each other, but like many of you, some of my greatest strengths and weaknesses are driven by the same part of my personality.

MG: Like Dustin, I think out loud when I'm considering ideas, and it can appear that I'm wavering back and forth when I'm just talking through the positives and negatives of various options. I'm explicit about my process, but I have also found that it's important for me to sit back and let the conversation happen so that I don't inadvertently shut out any voices. Also like Dustin, I have learned that it's important for me to state any limitations upfront so that we don't spin our wheels talking about an option that I ultimately will not support. The biggest challenge in building consensus is knowing when and where to start the conversation. My staff is a little larger than either Dustin's or Amanda's, and we have a few different monthly meetings that have some, but not all, of the same faces around the table. There have been a number of times where it hasn't been clear who the stakeholders are when an idea is initially discussed, and I try to balance the desire to talk through an exciting idea at its first appearance with the need to forestall too much discussion, so that absent stakeholders don't feel like we've already made a decision by the time we bring an idea to the right group.

In addition to picking the right meeting for a discussion, I have found that it's easier to build consensus if I invest the time in personal conversations with various stakeholders. This allows me to find out about possible concerns or issues before we dive into a group discussion, and work on having potential solutions ready to suggest so that we can be more efficient in making decisions. However, I don't want it to look like I'm intentionally foreshortening discussion by having these exploratory conversations, so I've found that it can be just as important to let the process be messier by having the discussions play out in meetings and invest the time in a longer (but more inclusive) process.

One thing that helps with the positional power issue mentioned by Dustin has been the transition away from me chairing all meetings. I suggested that we have elected chairs for the two largest groups: the all-staff meeting and the research assistance desk (RAD) meeting (consisting of all librarians and select staff who also work at that desk). I proposed that the chairs would be responsible for setting the meeting agendas and facilitating the meetings, though I would still attend and participate in discussions, as needed. The RAD group decided to give it a try, but the all-staff meeting wasn't ready for that kind of change. I'm still mindful of how I participate in discussions in both meetings, but I have felt a positive shift in how my voice is perceived in the RAD meetings.

ACP/Conclusion: In exploring the lessons we've learned in part three of this series, Dustin, Martin, and I delved more deeply into differences in our leadership styles, and, in particular, how we have handled power dynamics within our organizations. Often the practical matters take care of themselves when starting a new position, but learning how to become a leader of a unique group of people is a more complex and ever-evolving challenge. The consensus here is that effective leadership involves constant reflection and adapting to external needs and internal realities. We can see this manifest in holding back to ensure others are heard, finding purpose and movement behind inevitable silences, and stretching to challenge our libraries to embrace the "yes." 𝒵