

# Learning to lead

It's not just in classrooms anymore!

by Raynna Bowlby

Leaders are perpetual learners . . . [Learning] is absolutely indispensable under today's conditions of rapid change and complexity . . . Leaders have discovered not just how to learn but how to learn in an organizational context. They are able to concentrate on what matters most to the organization and to use the organization as a learning environment."<sup>1</sup>

ACRL President Maureen Sullivan's theme of "Leadership and Learning" catches none of us by surprise. Indeed, the "L words" are constantly on the lips of many in our libraries. Yet, they are spoken with the hint of mystery and awe. Just what is leadership anyway? And, even for the many of us who work in institutions of higher education, just what is learning these days? And, seemingly most mysterious of all, how does one learn to lead?

## Are you born with it?

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus remind us through their work that our view of what leadership is and who exercises it has changed over the centuries. Explanations have shifted from the "Great Man" theory that leaders are born, not made, to the "Big Bang" theory that great events make leaders of otherwise ordinary people.

Current belief is based to a great extent on the work of James MacGregor Burns and Bernard M. Bass on the "Transformative Leadership" theory, that is the transformational

leader is one who motivates others to do more than they originally expected to do. Bennis and Nanus maintain that "effective leadership can move organizations from current to future states, create visions of potential opportunities for organizations, instill within employees commitment to change and instill new cultures and strategies in organizations that mobilize and focus energy and resources. These leaders are not born. They emerge when organizations face new problems and complexities that cannot be solved by unguided evolution. They assume responsibilities for reshaping organizational practices to adapt to environmental changes. They direct organizational changes that build confidence and empower their employees to seek new ways of doing things. They overcome resistance to change by creating visions of the future that evoke confidence in and mastery of new organizational practices."<sup>2</sup>

## Learning to lead

If leaders, then, are not born, what is critical is learning to lead. Peter Vaill proposes "learning as a way of being" for "survival in a world of permanent white water," that is, the unpredictable environment of constant change.<sup>3</sup> According to Vaill's innovative philosophy of learning, just as white water continuously puts people in challenging situations that they have never encountered or experienced, learning how to successfully navigate constant change cannot be left to formal, insti-

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### About the author

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tutional training and degree programs, rather integrating the discipline of learning into everyday practice is necessary. Vaill describes this learning as multi-faceted and he defines seven types of learning—self-directed, creative, expressive, feeling, online, continual, and reflexive learning.

Another important dimension of learning, action learning, is increasingly being applied in modern organizations. Initially pioneered by R. W. Revans, action learning involves taking action in "real time," learning from the results, and incorporating that learning into future action using the organization itself as the learning context.

This is a new mental model for learning, differing from our traditional learning model in many ways. It is work-based rather than classroom-based, has a group orientation rather than an individual orientation, focuses on output rather than input, is active rather than passive, is concerned with the present and future rather than the past, deals with reality rather than hypothetical situations.

Action learning abounds in our academic and research libraries today, though we may not label it as such. For example, participation in library-wide strategic planning initiatives and development of self-managed teams are significant action learning opportunities. Through these activities we are learning by doing and at the same time "emerging" as leaders, recalling Bennis and Nanus' description above. As we all engage in this new work, we not only develop ourselves but we also lead the learning process in our organizations.

"Organizational learning is the process by which an organization obtains and uses new knowledge, tools, behaviors, and values. It happens at all levels in the organization—among individuals and groups as well as systemwide. Individuals learn as part of their daily activities, particularly as they interact with each other and the outside world. Groups learn as their members cooperate to accomplish common goals. The entire system learns as it obtains feedback from the environment and anticipates further changes. At all levels, newly learned knowledge is translated into new goals, procedures, expectations, role structures, and measures of success."<sup>4</sup>

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*("Image is everything" continued from page 277)*

Tired of the image problem? Be part of the image solution. In your next triathlon, wear a T-shirt that says, "Conan the Librarian."

When you accept your Oscar, thank the dean of your library school. And when someone remarks that you don't *look* like a librarian, take a page from Gloria Steinem and

say, "Yes, I do. This is what a librarian looks like."

Maybe once people realize that librarians, like those in most other professions, come in every shape, size, sex, sexual preference, tonsure, decibel level, and body-fat composition, we'll feel free to just relax and be ourselves. It just so happens that I *do* wear my hair in a bun. It's great for kickboxing. ■

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*("Learning to lead" continued from page 293)*

Recent articles in *C&RL News* on ACRL President Maureen Sullivan's theme of "Leadership and Learning" challenge all of us to be both leaders and learners and have offered insights into ways to do so within our libraries today. Another challenge is to stop thinking about learning as something that happens only in a classroom. By participating in various groups and teams doing real work in real time, we can both learn and lead.

## Notes

1. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus. *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997): 176.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

3. Peter B. Vaill. *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

4. Bennis and Nanus, *Leaders Strategies*, 178-9. ■

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*("ULS activities at Midwinter" continued from page 316)*

to validate users' passwords. The user stations are password-protected at night, which effectively limits access to UT students, staff, and faculty. Some universities have adopted open policies toward Web access, while others have initiated strict sign-up policies.

The final topic under discussion dealt with electronic reference services. Most libraries now offer some type of e-mail reference ser-

vice although not all have established procedures for monitoring these services or tracking statistics. The next discussion at the Annual Conference will focus on GIS and data services, planning for science libraries, and 24-hour library access. The Discussion Group welcomes all librarians who are interested in these topics to attend its meeting in New Orleans.—*Anne Garrison, reference librarian at Georgia Tech Library, e-mail: anne.garrison@library.gatech.edu* ■