

Steven J. Bell

# A year of learning for your lifelong leadership journey

## Climbing Mount Everest

**D**o academic librarians really need more leadership advice? It requires little effort to inundate one's self with an avalanche of leadership literature, from the *Harvard Business Review* to Leadership Digital Daily (a seven-day a week newsletter that links to dozens of articles, blog posts, and essays about leadership.) You can literally spend so much time reading about leadership that you'll have no time left to actually lead anyone to accomplish anything of value. Then there are those times when you come across leadership wisdom that is so simple yet profound that it refreshes your spirit, and reminds you of the importance of continuously learning to lead at any level.

As I read my local newspaper one Sunday, I discovered an article profiling Michael Useem, professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and renowned expert on leadership education and development. The article described a leadership program he created for business executives that requires them to perform a simple task: climb Mt. Everest.

### Leaders never stop learning

Why make CEOs with years of experience in leadership positions and knowledge gained from multiple leadership programs undertake such a physical challenge? Because great leadership requires continuous learning. Useem states that "Leadership is a lifelong journey to work out how you lead. The way you do it this year may need to change next year."<sup>1</sup> Even the most experienced leaders should always expose themselves to new

ideas, confront new challenges, and rethink their leadership style. ACRL members recently started a leadership discussion group for this exact reason, to share what they learn on their lifelong journey in order to learn from each other.

In a post-conference survey, ACRL 2011 attendees selected "leadership/management" as either their first or second response to a question about top professional concerns. Despite a steady stream of blogs, articles, books, presentations, podcasts, and more, ACRL members make it clear they want more opportunities to discuss and learn about leadership.

### Learn from your crucible moment

Great leaders also learn from their crucible moments, and climbing Everest presents leaders with just such an experience. A crucible moment is more than an everyday challenge. It is quite possibly a life-altering event. In the book *Crucibles of Leadership*, the author states that crucibles "are more like trials or tests that corner individuals and force them to answer questions about who they are and what is really important to them."<sup>2</sup> Leaders profiled in the book share similar stories about how their crucible moments triggered realizations that transformed into visions for how to passionately lead others. Academic librarians have their crucible moments too, perhaps less grand than a Mt. Everest climb, and each is a transformative opportunity to

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learn something new about their personal leadership style. The book identifies three crucible types that offer lessons for learning leadership. When tested by a totally challenging situation that we've never before confronted, that is a "new territory" crucible. It teaches us that we have the capacity to adapt and develop new behaviors beyond our comfort zone. When we are forced to face our deepest fears, those situations that might induce panic, that is a "reversal" crucible, and it teaches us that we can face our fears, live through failure, overcome obstacles, and still learn and move forward. The final crucible type is "suspension," and it encourages leaders to reflect mindfully on any learning moment. Academic library leaders who will excel in the uncertain times ahead are those who can endure and emerge from crucible moments and convert them into deep learning experiences.

### Member-leaders lead the way

Whether you are leading ACRL as its president, a Board member, a committee chair, or are just planning to say yes to a new leadership opportunity, now is always the right time to improve your leadership skills as you move along that lifelong journey of understanding how you lead.

As ACRL president, I am committed to leading the Board in advancing the Plan for Excellence. The work of accomplishing the objectives that define each of our three strategic goal areas (value, learning, scholarship) falls largely to our dedicated member-leaders who inspire their colleagues to accomplish the tasks that will make ACRL an outstanding professional association that consistently returns great value to its members. That's why, despite the plethora of leadership information, emphasizing the importance of leadership to academic librarians is a primary outcome for this yearlong series.

I'm not alone in my thinking. ALA President Maureen Sullivan, a librarian whose name is synonymous with leadership, is promoting leadership development during her presidential year. This series of articles

will spotlight academic library leaders sharing their perspectives on leadership and what it means to their professional careers, all in the spirit of promoting lifelong learning for leaders.

### What lies ahead

The 2013 ACRL President's Program, a joint program with LLAMA, will serve as the culmination of this exploration of leadership themes. The featured speaker at this year's program is Karol Wasylshyn, author of the books *Standing on Marbles: Three Leader Types in Verse and Imagery* and *Behind the Executive Door: Unexpected Lessons for Managing Your Boss and Career*.

Wasylshyn is a licensed psychologist who is a pioneer of executive coaching. I've had the pleasure of hearing Wasylshyn share her research and practice findings based on her work with dozens of corporate executives.

Leading up to the President's Program you'll find new additions to this series several times between now and June 2013. I've asked the President's Program Planning Committee to develop an activity in which a larger number of ACRL members can participate, so that we may share our leadership experiences and learn from each other.

The great, never-ending debate in the leadership literature is whether it is an innate quality or a learnable skill. Michael Useem passionately believes that leadership can be learned, and sees the growth of each leader as a work in progress. Academic librarians who agree with Useem should look forward to this year of leadership learning.

### Notes

1. Mike Armstrong, "Michael Useem and Climbing the Everest of Leadership" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 15, 2012, [www.philly.com/philly/business/20120715\\_Michael\\_Useem\\_and\\_climbing\\_the\\_Everest\\_of\\_leadership.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/business/20120715_Michael_Useem_and_climbing_the_Everest_of_leadership.html)

2. Robert J. Thomas, *Crucibles of Leadership* (Boston, MA : Harvard Business Press, 2008). ¶¶