



Evidence Summary

Leadership is Central to the Organizational Success of Libraries

A review of:

Mullins, John, and Margaret Linehan. "The Central Role of Leaders in Public Libraries." Library Management 26.6/7 (2005): 386-96.

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Abstract

Objective – To provide an understanding of the concept of leadership as perceived and practised by a group of international public library leaders, thereby contributing to the existing body of literature on this topic.

Design – Qualitative study employing in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 3 subjects and 27 e-mail interviews based on 30 structured questions formulated from a review of the literature.

Setting – Nottingham and Rotherham, two cities in the Public libraries in Ireland, Britain, and the east coast of the United States during 2003/04.

Subjects – Thirty senior public library leaders.

Methods – Thirty top level library leaders, 50% of whom came from outside Ireland, were selected based on the following rationale concerning their institutions: have a history of providing publicly funded public libraries; are under-researched; and, accessibility for the authors. Irish librarians were chosen based on their national profile, geographic convenience to the researchers, and availability/cooperation. Only library leaders or deputy leaders were considered. Interviews for 27 candidates were scheduled via e-mail and 3 were arranged through face-to-face meetings. Participants were asked 30 structured questions drawn from the current literature on leadership. Responses were recorded electronically and later transcribed for analysis via a grounded theory approach that categorized the data. This method of analysis endeavours to provide theory based on research observations that begin from qualitative

data and then go through a process of sifting and categorization, which leads to a hypothesis.

Main results – Nine broad categories emerged from the "grounded theory analysis." The paper deals with only 1 - the central role of the library leader. In response to queries by the authors, 67% (20) agreed that leadership took precedence over all other factors as a determinant for organizational success. Ten (33%) disagreed and were evenly split as to their reasons. Five said it was an important factor, and five felt leadership did not take precedence over other drivers of success. The study reveals that leaders do have an impact in determining organizational culture, with 63% saying the leader determines the culture, and 37% stating the leader only contributes to the culture of an organization. National cultural differences affect this point of view, for example 73% of the Irish public librarians, 60% of the British public librarians, and 40% of the American public librarians stated that it is the leader rather than the staff who determine organizational culture. Another core finding reveals that not all CEO's are leaders and not all librarians are leadership material, which points to the need for more classic leadership training.

Conclusion – Based on the study's findings, the authors hypothesize that leadership is a central component in the strategic and operational practices and success of public librarianship. Transformational, rather than "leader centric" methods of leadership encourage growth of organizational change and success.

Commentary

The authors have achieved their stated purpose, at least in part. Their efforts have certainly added to the paucity of literature on the topic of leadership in libraries. The

research methods used raise a number of concerns. Despite the authors' assertions, it is unclear whether the methodology is based on a "representative" sample. The criteria for inclusion in the study appear very broad and based on convenience. At no time do the authors provide a concise statement of what they believe the attributes of a leader are to use as a basis of their selection of interviewees. There appears to be an underlying assumption that a leader is someone who has risen to the top position in a library. There is no evidence provided that would attest to the subjects' leadership capabilities. A description of how "grounded theory" was actually applied would have clarified how the data was analysed. In addition, the paper fails to delineate the 9 broad thematic categories identified from the results. It would have been helpful if answers to all the questions asked of the interviewees had been provided to give a fuller picture of the study results. Indeed, there is a sense stemming from the lack of full disclosure of the results, that the results examined have been "cherry picked" to support a hypothesis. Much of the discussion is based on anecdotal evidence. The authors purport to explore the "central role of leaders" in their research paper. Their results, however, are not well documented or elaborated. The authors state that they have found a "central role of leaders" which paraphrased is that "modern leaders need to see their staff as colleagues rather than as subordinates, and need to encourage autonomy in order to manage existing and future challenges." While this is an interesting supposition, none of the data presented brings the reader to this same conclusion. Nor is there any explanation as to how the authors arrived at their hypothesis based on the gathered data. A closer examination of the geographic differences in leadership would have been enlightening – does the overall culture of a society affect the style of leadership? Also, it would have been interesting to know how

those working with the subjects viewed the subjects' leadership skills, and how these subordinates themselves defined leadership. This article is a starting point from which further research will provide greater insights into the role of leadership in public libraries.