The Next Step: Manager | Careers

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by <u>Jennifer A. Dixon</u>
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CAREERS A career in libraries can take unexpected directions. In these three articles, we offer advice from those in the trenches on how to climb the career ladder successfully—or gracefully climb down from a job that's just not right.

The Next Step: Manager | <u>The Next Step: Director</u> | <u>Exit Strategies</u>

Conversations with library managers across diverse systems reveal widely varied experiences. They also surface a handful of overlapping core values that make for a truly effective library manager and offer lessons for those who aspire to the role.

VARIOUS PATHS

No single career path leads to a position as a library manager. Many professionals find themselves taking on these leadership roles unexpectedly, often thanks to organic growth within their department. Tom Blake, digital projects manager with the Boston Public Library and a 2014 *LJ* Mover & Shaker (M&S), started out as manager of a very small digital department and over the past ten years has seen his managerial responsibilities expand with the need for digital projects, content discovery, and technical services. "I never really wanted to be a manager," he says. "It's something you almost have to let sneak up on you." He encourages any aspiring managers to start as librarians in a specialty that attracts them and build from there.

Similarly, Andria L. Amaral, young adult services manager with Charleston County Public Library and a 2016 *LJ* M&S, started as a "team of one" and the first young adult librarian in South Carolina. She steadily expanded the reach of her team duties; she now works with two library assistants and colleagues throughout the county system.

Others benefit from the support of colleagues who encourage them to take on greater responsibilities. Shanika Heyward, community branch manager for the Indianapolis Public Library and another 2016 M&S, became a manager nearly immediately after completing her graduate degree because, she explains, she had worked as a clerk in that library system since high school and "everybody was really rooting for me to be a librarian." Heyward also describes her career path as "accidental," noting that her early aspirations for a career in social work or counseling were useful background for her current work as a library manager focused on community support and helping others.

LEARNING BEYOND THE LIBRARY

Library managers cite a wide variety of experiences that inform effective managerial styles—far beyond traditional professional development workshops or classroom work. Erin Berman, project manager for technology and innovation at San José Public Library, CA, and a 2016 M&S, refers to her stint teaching English abroad in Georgia as a major influence, as she learned "how to be under pressure and overwhelmed but still need to accomplish tasks—I think a lot of management is thinking quickly on your feet and being able to negotiate through tricky circumstances." She notes that her undergraduate theater studies increased her comfort in putting herself out there and accepting rejection.

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—Tom Blake, Digital Projects Manager, Boston Public Library

Blake, meanwhile, cites the multitasking and "crisis mitigation" of parenting. Lisa Rosenblum, a 2009 M&S and director and chief librarian with the Brooklyn Public Library, found her summer jobs as a camp counselor useful for discovering methods for managing a group and achieving consensus.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Frequent and open communication with team members is at the core of growth and success as a manager. Berman, for example, recommends starting a project by setting forth "what are our expectations from everybody and what is our end goal, so that everyone on board can understand where we're going" and asking questions or offering suggestions. This fosters an open atmosphere. Both Blake and Amaral also advocate frequent meetings for staff to discuss their projects, prioritizing face-to-face contact with coworkers.

Heyward highlights "honesty and trustworthiness" as key attributes of a successful manager and encourages aspiring managers to "just ask questions" and seek out mentors and other professionals whom they trust to learn from and to whom they can vent. On a daily basis, she makes a point of ordering her to-do list and ensuring she contacts every person who needs to hear from her—"if you neglect relationships they start to die," she says.

Another challenge for managers is to understand that different people have dramatically different communication styles, and supervisors must adapt. Failing to assess the needs of individual personalities can lead to misunderstanding and hinder team projects. Rosenblum calls this process an "environmental scan" and recommends that professionals take steps to take stock before leaping in to work.

"Speaking up" and questioning helped Berman become a manager. "If I ask, then I increase my odds that I will get it—the worst someone can do is say no," she explains, acknowledging that many librarians can be introverted or nervous about rejection. While Amaral also acknowledges

the value of passion, however, she names "pick your battles" as some of her best early career advice. It is a losing proposition "to tilt at every single windmill that is out there and try to fix everything," she says.

Mentorship and professional networks can prove vital. According to Rosenblum, it is "important to get out and meet with people," including at board meetings and conferences with peers. "Other librarians are dealing with the same things you are" and can offer a useful exchange of ideas and troubleshooting. It can also be valuable to talk with trusted individuals outside of work, for a fresh perspective.

DELEGATION WITHOUT MICROMANAGING

Appropriate delegation of tasks can prove a challenge for many new managers, who may fall prey either to taking on too much themselves or passing along less desirable projects. For Berman, the key to delegating is gaining trust from a person "so that they know I am only going to ask them to do things that are within their time and capabilities." While it may be appealing to delegate "not fun" tasks, says Amaral, she keeps in mind that ultimate responsibility for tasks such as scheduling should fall to her. She values "participatory management" and "wouldn't want to ask someone to do something that I wouldn't want to do."

It can also pose an issue when a librarian transitions quickly from staff member to manager. According to Heyward, who experienced just that, it took time and patience to earn her team's trust. "You have to learn about each of your staff and respect each of them [the way] they are," she says of managing the shift. Rosenblum also notes this as a potential issue: "Don't turn into an autocrat, and remember to respect the people you were peers with."

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>
> —Shanika Heyward, Community Branch Manager, Indianapolis Public Library

In addition, supervisory work benefits a great deal from familiarity with basic library tasks. It is much easier to gain the trust of staff members when overseeing projects such as processing or cataloging when one has the same experience. According to Blake, "A lot of the positions I manage are things that I've done myself."

Background knowledge and a willingness to get into the trenches also builds collegiality and trust. On any project, Berman explains, she views herself as a teammate and makes a point of taking on tasks alongside the rest of the staff; she notes that earlier in her career she appreciated a branch manager who made an effort "to come out to the desk and work with us."

Delegation can also present an opportunity for managers to give staff freedom to explore, try new things, and take ownership of their work. Berman recommends "having faith in your staff and giving them lots of leadership roles." The cardinal rule, as multiple managers tell *LJ*, is "don't micromanage." Successful managers are capable of relinquishing control and giving their staff a chance to shine. Says Rosenblum, "Part of my job is to not get in the way of my managers. To not be an obstacle but to help them to achieve their goals. They, in turn, do the same for their own staff."

MANAGERS AS ADVOCATES

Any professionals hoping to grow into a managerial role, or even to establish themselves in a particular specialty area, must advocate for their own abilities. Says Rosenblum, "If you want to work your way up the ladder, take on projects that other people don't want to do—show the higher ups that you can manage a project." Taking this kind of initiative is also an excellent opportunity to develop concrete professional skills. "A good management career builds on previous jobs," according to Rosenblum.

Whether or not a particular manager has direct budgetary responsibility, Blake explains that "one of the most important characteristics of a manager, especially at a library, is advocacy for your department—you should never rest on your laurels." This goes hand in hand, he says, with making sure your staff are "mission driven," with a clear sense of what they are doing and why. Staff members also benefit from seeing their managers being vocal to obtain resources. "It's good to always have a little bit of fight in you," says Blake, listing "urgency" and "audacity" as key characteristics that can help managers prove their institutions' relevance and cope with changes in the industry. Amaral, similarly, says that she has been "advocating [for growth] since day one—if you just leave it alone, nothing will ever happen."

Jennifer A. Dixon is a librarian and recent graduate of the School of Information, Pratt Institute, New York

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