

From the desk of the Library Provocateur

About lunchtime one Thursday not too long ago, as I was ransacking my desk drawers for chocolate or paracetamol (whichever came to hand first), the phone rang. It was a colleague calling to share the news that another large organisation had appointed a non librarian to its top library job – the latest in a long line of library manager ‘scratchings’.

As the details were revealed, my rose tinted spectacles flashed to red. Not only had a non librarian been appointed to a hitherto ‘professional’ position without the transparency of an open recruitment process, the appointee came to the job from a customer service background elsewhere in the organisation. Even more galling, if that was possible, the appointment constituted ‘additional responsibilities’ lathered on top of an existing management position external to the library. Talk about making the library staff feel valued!

As I huffed and puffed down the phone to my colleague, it was the revelation of the new appointee’s background – customer service – that added insult to vicarious injury. How dare the organisation do that, when the library profession itself is so customer-centric, and has such a wealth of talented supervisors and managers ready to step up?

I mean, the profession has management talent going begging – we do. Don’t we? As I hung up the phone and reflected further, I started to have doubts.

It is my firm belief – an article of professional faith, if you will – that libraries are best managed by library qualified professionals: for the same reason that schools are best managed by teachers, newspapers by journalists, and, if we are honest, hospitals by doctors.

As librarians and library technicians, in common with other professions, we share a body of knowledge and a set of professional values that are intrinsic to our professional practice and should not (indeed cannot!) be abrogated to others.

This is not to say that we should be insular or parochial, particularly when it comes to professional development and growth. In my early career, the library managers I most admired actively added to their professional body of knowledge at every opportunity – whether through further study, mentoring, or acting appointments outside the profession. It was their goal, or so it seemed to me, to create a package of professional and managerial capabilities second to none. They were highly effective managers and active, aware library professionals.

It was also not uncommon in my early career for library managers to be promoted into more generic executive roles – such was their management capability and standing as leaders. It still happens today, but seemingly less often – perhaps because some of the stepping stones to higher level management have disappeared from libraries.

I worry that our profession has become progressively cynical and apathetic towards the practise of management.

If workforce surveys and conversations over the past decade are any indication, you could be forgiven for thinking there is dearth of managerial talent from which to make appointments. I personally do not believe this to be the case. The raw material is still present in the profession, and in many cases, may only need some gentle encouragement to take the next step.

Too often though I hear at conferences and in tea rooms that gifted and energetic practitioners are not seeking advancement because the role of manager is seen to be too troublesome – not worth the money! Related to this, library manager colleagues tell me they struggle to find library qualified supervisors and team leaders for their libraries. To fill critical gaps they sometimes have to look outside the profession.

I would be the first to agree that no amount of money is ever really enough to compensate a middle level manager for the degree of anxiety and stress that they might experience on occasions in their work. But that is only part of the picture and the rewards, in my experience, typically outweigh the costs – particularly if the individual can see where their contributions as a manager are making a

difference: to colleagues, clients, and the profession.

The trouble seems to be that many talented colleagues with designs on management roles either self-select out at crucial points in their careers, or become so frustrated with the stop-start nature of progression within the profession that they seek fulfilment elsewhere. The situation is not helped when critical stepping stones into library management are removed or bestowed on others outside the profession. The challenge for our profession is to help those with any inclination towards management reach their full potential.

Clearly any difficulty grooming talent within the profession is compounded when organisations – some of them library organisations – no longer view librarians as being capable of managing a large and complex library service. If organisations are consciously overlooking librarians when recruiting managers, we need to understand why it is happening and decide what is to be done about it.

I would contend that the issue is more complex than it first appears, and that it needs to be debated and a response clarified within our profession as a matter of urgency. To do otherwise is to ultimately give up a large measure of influence over our collective future as a profession. I could be blunt and say that it is to give up as a profession.

It is a fact of life in libraries – as it is in other professional services – that external appointments to leadership positions are made on occasions, and typically they are made for a reason. The challenge is to understand the thinking behind an appointment, and, right or wrong in our mind, learn from it. Even bad appointments, as we might perceive them, can be instructive.

We should also bear in mind that when external appointments are made, for whatever underlying reason or intended purpose, they bring to the library a range of new skills. If we are serious about reversing the trend, we might usefully learn from our new colleagues.

It is another observation of mine that the professional values I spoke of earlier sometimes don’t mesh with those of the parent organisation – particularly if it is not a library. This mis-match of values, if not recognised and addressed, may alone be sufficient to cause organisations to write job ads with the implied message, “librarians need not apply”.

Here’s a loaded question for all of us to consider: what are our personal and professional values (can we actually identify them?) and how do they relate to those of our organisation? If you answer this question honestly, you may be surprised at the response.

Thus I would further argue that any debate we have within the profession around the question of non-librarian appointments to management positions probably needs to occur in the wider context of compulsory ‘professional development’ – a critical professional value.

Others have argued and I can but agree that if we are not prepared to do more as individuals and collectively to enhance external perceptions of us as ‘professional people’, more library manager positions will be lost to us. And with the loss of those positions, we lose the capacity to influence the direction of our libraries and ultimately our professional practice. We lose control of our professional destiny.

As Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric was once famously quoted, “control your destiny or somebody else will.”

That is our challenge, and time is running out.

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