

OH, THE POSSIBILITIES!



In the early 1990s the notion of 'leadership', as such, was only just emerging in the information sector as something quite distinct from 'management'. It certainly wasn't top of mind for me way back in 1991, when I picked up the phone one day to hear a voice demanding to know if I had a passport.

On the other end of the line was the then Director General of the National Library of Australia, Warren Horton—and that was how I found out I had been selected as the first Australian to attend the Snowbird Leadership Development Institute in Utah.

The Snowbird program inspired the first intensive residential leadership program for the sector in Australia—the Aurora Leadership Institute—launched in 1995. Since then, some 500 Australasian library and information professionals, including mentors, have participated in the Aurora program for emerging leaders.

My Snowbird experience taught me that effective leadership learning can be quite confronting. How any one of us will lead depends very much on who we are and what we understand about ourselves and others. So I asked a handful of 'Aurorans' about their experience and where it has led them.

In 2005, Jill Benn had just been appointed Associate Law Librarian at the University of Western Australia. Now she is the University's Associate Director (Research and Learning Support) within Information Services. Hero Macdonald was Senior Client Services Librarian at the University of Melbourne in 2011 and is now Acting Arts Librarian there, while Carmel O'Sullivan was National Training Librarian for law firm Blake Dawson Waldron (now Ashurt Lawyers) back in 2004, and has just swapped public libraries in Perth for a treechange in Toowoomba. Rebecca Randle, Regional Librarian at Logan City

Council, completed the program in 2012 as the recipient of the Warren Horton Scholarship.

Jill says the "opportunity to learn about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses," was important to her, along with forming professional relationships with colleagues and mentors. She had just been appointed to a leadership role and finding out about the "many different reactions to change which require different strategies to manage" proved to be amongst the most powerful learnings of the program for her. "Self-awareness, honesty and confidence," she says, "are essential leadership skills".

Deputy University Librarian Jenny Ellis tapped Hero on the shoulder for the 2011 program. She says the program's reputation and feedback from previous participants "encouraged me to take up the opportunity. Aurora provided some very powerful learning experiences and it is something that I reflect on often," she says.

"In terms of leadership, it reinforced the importance of self-reflection and emotional intelligence, to engage the people around you in new ideas and courses of action. Reflection is definitely something I have spent more time working on since Aurora."

Identifiable progression in terms of career promotion is something of an unwritten expectation in the professions. Participants in the Aurora Emerging Leaders program have already been identified as potential leaders, but success has many definitions. Both Carmel and Hero say the program led to a rethink in terms of their career paths and priorities.

Carmel says she had a career plan of sorts but it was "fairly narrowly focused" and after Aurora she made an unanticipated move from legal librarianship to public libraries, influenced by a "fantastic public librarian" mentor on the program and leading to what she thereafter referred to as "the best job in the world".



Jill was still a relatively new graduate at the time and found herself committing to getting more involved in ALIA as a result of Aurora. She joined the team organising the 2006 ALIA Biennial Conference and has since served a term as convenor of ALIAWest, experiences she describes as both “beneficial and enjoyable”.

For Rebecca, becoming a librarian represented a career change and she had only just begun in a new position, guiding her team through a “significant change management process”. She says “right from the outset I knew that attending the Institute was one of my big career goals”. The experience gave her “a level of confidence in myself and my chosen career that I didn’t realise I had and the ability to contribute back to the profession in a positive way”.

I have a feeling that, had been able to talk to more of—or all of—those 500 alumni, they would cite the same ‘take away’ of increased self-awareness, self-reflection and self-belief. With it comes a shared renewed excitement about the profession, and I’d say that’s essential to good leadership, no matter where you are or what role you are performing in the sector.

The whole leadership training experience was described to me in 1991 as “magic”. Carmel says the experience “opens your eyes to the ‘innate rightness’ of what libraries offer the community, the range of talent we have in our profession and the possibilities”. Magic indeed.

LEE WELCH
Editor, INCITE

*Images L-R: Jill Benn (Class of 2005),
Rebecca Randle (Class of 2012),
Hero Macdonald (Class of 2011),
Carmel O’Sullivan (Class of 2004).*



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