

LEADERS: NATURE OR NURTURE?

With the focus on newly appointed library leaders in this issue of INCITE, Diana Hodge thought it might be interesting to highlight some research into leadership, particularly in terms of the skills leaders require and the question of whether leaders are born or can be trained.

I found a very interesting series of articles by Pixey Anne Mosley published in the journal *Library Leadership & Management*. Under the heading of Engaging Leadership, the articles explore what it means to lead and the myriad of ways in which an individual can show leadership qualities.

For anyone aspiring to leadership but wondering if you are really the right type of person, or for those in leadership positions who suffer from 'imposter syndrome' Pixey's articles are fascinating, thought provoking and hopefully will encourage you to view leadership differently. These articles are not research-based; rather they are well informed observation and discussion; all available in full text through the ALIA subscription to ProQuest available to members (details below).

The first one of the series I read (2014 a) discussed the distinction between 'grassroots leaders' and those in 'titled' leadership roles. The former are those that 'lead from the middle'; they may lead by example by getting things done, motivating others, by questioning decisions and standing up against 'group think'.

All these behaviours are examples of leadership but they are frequently overlooked in favour of the titled managerial leadership model. In this model, leadership is directly linked to particular organisational roles. Too strong a link between leadership and power or being 'in charge' is not a healthy thing for an organisation.

It is incumbent on those of us already in leadership positions to look for these subtle indicators of leadership ability in those on the ground.

We must understand that not all leadership roles are the same – they can require completely different skill sets. A great grassroots leader will be passionate about what they are doing at the micro level and may not be able to make the adjustment to seeing the big picture at a higher level. A more senior leader needs to be able to detach themselves from their own particular passions in order to make balanced,



objective decisions. 'Passionate' is, I think, a much overused word, we are all meant to be passionate about our work and it was very refreshing to read a discussion around the value in being dispassionate.

This ability of leaders to disengage is the focus of another of Pixey's pieces (2014 b). We tend to think of disengagement as a negative thing, but for successful leadership it is an essential ability. Not only is it essential for decision making, but can also be crucial in dealing with individual poor performance.

Pixey addresses various scenarios in which the leader must emotionally disengage from a situation. When all avenues for improvement have been exhausted, a leader may have to stand back and let a staff member fail; to disengage to the point where you watch another individual fail is hard to do. Most of us work in team-based cultures and giving someone enough rope to hang themselves is not comfortable. I wish I had read Pixey's discussion of this a few years ago before I was faced with exactly this situation.

The final column I will mention is Understanding and Respecting the Shades of Gray (2013, nothing to do with *Fifty Shades!*). For anyone who doubts themselves as a leader, or for those making the transition to leadership it is quite relief to read this article – leadership doesn't come with a rule book, decisions are not clear cut, and those that we are attempting to lead can be 'highly emotional, variable and unpredictable', according to Pixey. I highly recommend Pixey's articles for anyone who wants a realistic picture of the sometimes murky waters of leadership.

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FROM OUR COLLECTION:

Mosley, P 2014 (a), Leadership Writ Large, Beyond the Title, *Library Leadership & Management* vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 1–6.

Mosley, P 2014 (b), Knowing When to Disengage, *Library Leadership & Management* vol. 28, no. 4, pp 1–5.

Mosely, P 2013, Understanding and Respecting the Shades of Gray, *Library Leadership & Management* vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 1–6.

These articles are all available to Members online and free of charge at www.alia.org.au/information-and-resources/ebooks-and-journals.