

Change Leadership Styles and Behaviors in Academic Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries in the 21st century are in the midst of constant change caused by advances in technology, shifting demands of faculty and students, declining budgets, transformations in publishing and in other methods of acquiring scholarly research. Librarians working in this environment must cope with continuous change while still providing research support to their primary clientele - faculty and students. Determining the best methods of change leadership to cope with these forces is vital. As technology has increasingly impacted the workplace, best practices for leading employees through change initiatives have become increasingly common. As a new millennium is entered and the pace of change accelerates the importance of determining the best leadership styles for assisting followers in these transitions is even more imperative.

Traditionally change leadership research has fallen into two camps – those that emphasize the importance of the leader's role in facilitating change, and those that look at change leadership as a situational contingency that is moderated by traditional leadership behaviors and styles (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Yi, 2008). The former approach focuses on what leaders should do when confronted with a change initiative and how to encourage followers to embrace change. This approach is typified by the work of Kotter. This article concentrates on the latter approach which believes that certain leadership styles are more useful in situations of change and is typified by the work of Bass and Riggio.

BACKGROUND

Academic libraries have been involved in a process of continuous change over the past thirty years due to the impact of technology on all aspects of librarianship. From the automated card catalog, web based database searching, remote off-campus access, streaming video, downloadable e-books, and patron driven acquisition, advances in technology have continually affected and changed the way librarians perform their jobs. These technological advances have created numerous pressures on librarians ranging from shifting job responsibilities to frequent library reorganizations.

The Disruptive Innovation Era

Libraries remained hierarchical organizations well into the 1960's. The major shift in academic library organization was the direct result of technological advances. The introduction of the computer to the library workplace was the type of "disruptive innovation" discussed by Christensen (2003) in his seminal work "The Innovator's Solution." Academic libraries adopted two new technologies which changed the workplace for librarians: first the online public access catalog (OPAC), followed by online databases. The OPAC changed the way patrons located print materials in the library. It also changed the way librarians performed their duties. By the late 1990's the majority of academic libraries had switched over to online access of databases (Kenan, 2012). An academic librarian without technological skill cannot function in the 21st century academic library.

Traditional Leadership Methods

Reinforcement/Transactional Leadership

This style is typified by the type of manager who rewards good employees and corrects poor performance with negative feedback or withholding wanted gain. This can involve various types of positive and negative reinforcement. Bass and Bass (2008) defined contingent reward as a constructive transaction. "The leader assigns a task or obtains agreement from the follower on what needs to be done and arranges for psychological or material rewards of followers in exchange for satisfactorily carrying out the assignment" (p. 623). Reinforcement leadership makes an employee's job simple – the employee is told what to do and instructed how to do it. Some employees enjoy this type of work environment – they know exactly where they stand and little independent thought or initiative is required. However, for motivated and innovative employees, such an environment can become tedious and stifling. Suwannarat (1994) found that contingent reward was the most commonly used transactional leadership behavior by library directors while active/passive management by exception was used slightly less often (p. 77).

Consultative Leadership

Consultative leadership is typified by the type of manager who asks for and encourages employee feedback but reserves the final decision making power. Consultative leadership is still quite common in many academic research libraries. Most library directors will meet with librarians when a change initiative is contemplated to receive feedback from those who will be affected. However, this type of leader tends to only accept feedback which agrees with their point of view. Negative feedback is often either ignored or punished. Library leaders who practice this style promote apathy in their followers. Librarians soon realize their opinions and expertise are not valued

and tune out from such discussions. They accept change passively or resist quietly. The deluded leaders who employ such a leadership style take the silence for agreement, when it is in fact apathy, disgruntlement and quiet resistance to change.

Contingency Theories of Leadership

There are various theories of contingency leadership which propose that the best leadership style varies with the actual situation encountered. Situational leadership dictates that different problems often require different leadership styles. Another contingency theory of leadership is the path-goal theory of leadership. Path-goal theory leadership cuts across all the leadership styles as at various times a leader may be exhibiting transactional, transformative, consultative, directive or even autocratic behaviors. It is incumbent upon the leader to select the correct leadership behavior to fit each circumstance.

Podell (2012) applied path-goal theory to academic library leadership. Ernest Shackleton was used to exemplify how path-goal theory can be utilized by library leaders. Despite having his ship crushed by ice, Shackleton was able to lead his crew to safety without the loss of a single man. Wolcott (1984) investigated path-goal theory in academic libraries and found the theory to be inapplicable. He attributed the negative results to librarians having a low need-for-independence. However, it seems more likely that criticisms of path-goal theory as being overly reliant on expectancy theory which does not account for emotional reactions to decision dilemmas or human motivations such as self-concepts were responsible for the lack of confirmation (Yukl, 2013).

Situational leadership has also been a leadership style addressed in the library literature. Dragon (1979) proposed that a new theory of leadership was needed and suggested that situational leadership could be the foundation of this new theory. Library supervisors were found to be higher on the initiating structure dimension than other groups including corporation presidents



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