

Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way: Management Succession in Libraries

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During a recent **R2** project at **Carleton College** in Northfield, Minnesota, I interviewed **Chris Sinkler-Miller**, the Periodicals/E-Journals Specialist. **Chris** manages **SFX** for the *Bridge*, a catalog shared by **Carleton** and **St. Olaf College**. She has obviously mastered the **SFX** knowledgebase, linking, e-resource cataloging and holdings maintenance — all those tasks that help users find the electronic content they so desire.

At the time we spoke, Northfield had just experienced a world-class hailstorm, with the Minnesota sky dropping ice bombs “the size of grapefruits,” and causing massive damage to roofs and vehicles. Most staff members were driving rental cars, and **Chris** was no exception. Her temporary ride was a **Chrysler PT Cruiser**. Personally, I got a kick out of these slightly quirky vehicles when they first came out, and made an innocuous remark to this effect. **Chris** replied, “I hate it. It makes me feel like a boomer.”

So there it was, my “moment of Zen”, to borrow **Jon Stewart's** phrase. One moment, we were professional peers, looking for improvements in the e-resources workflow. The next, I was mentally transformed into “boomer dude,” scrambling to keep up with a smart Gen X-er, and trying not to show it. It's a moment lots of us are facing right now.

At Sea-Tac Airport, headed home from **ALA**, I had a related conversation with a thirty-something hot-shot who ranted about impending retirements in libraries and at vendors: “All these gray-hairs keep talking about retirement — well, stop talking and just go, already!” Within a week of that, while viewing the natural history “March of the Librarians” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td922l0NoDQ>), I was forcibly struck by the gimpiness, grayness, baldness, and generally slow pace of our tribe.

Wake-up calls are flooding the switchboard, folks! We really are getting old. And while we can and should argue that experience brings context and clarity; that years bring perspective and political skill; and that active aging brings judgment and balance, we also have to ask ourselves honestly: “Are we in the way?”

Libraries are good places to work, and

boomers are staying longer in key positions, sometimes settling in and making them awfully comfortable. Consider these statistics, drawn from **Stanley Wilder's** excellent “Demographic Change in Academic Librarianship” (Washington DC, Association of Research Libraries, 2003.)

- In 1986, 43% of ARL Directors were under 50 years old; in 2000, a mere 5%.
- In 1985, 44% of Directors had more than 24 years of professional experience; in 2000, 86% boast such longevity.

The very idea that someone in her late thirties or early forties, with 10-15 years of experience, would take over as the director of a major library seems almost incomprehensible to us now. When discussing promotions or succession with library administrators, the phrase we most often hear is “she's not ready.”

There's often some truth to this assertion. In recent years, our profession has witnessed a flattening of library organizations, resulting in fewer middle management positions.

There are some missing rungs

on the old career ladder, and fewer opportunities for future leaders to develop the necessary skills. But these are times of profound change in libraries, and a strong dose of thirty-something energy, ideas, and even naiveté may be more important than all that experience. Boomers need to remember that **JFK** was 43 when he became President; **Bill Clinton** 46. We didn't have a problem with that! And who among us has felt completely “ready” for every promotion or new challenge they've faced? The fear that accompanies being over one's head is a powerful motivator.

At the **TAIGA 2 Forum** in Seattle, a group of 20 **AUL's** discussed succession planning, and a few comments and questions from that session are illuminating:

- Is our succession planning too focused on old management models?
- Our generation has made administration look tedious, focused on pushing paper and politics.

- Succession planning is needed at all levels, from supervisor to director.
- Do library managers always need to be librarians?
- There's an enormous need for technical skills, and GenX/NetGen staff integrate those naturally.
- Project and interim management opportunities abound, and can help identify talent and develop skills.
- Core competencies include team-building, communication, and innovative thinking.
- Should we be making a more conscious effort to promote younger people?

These are important questions, and now is the time to be grappling with them. It's encouraging to see programs like **ALA's** “Emerging Leaders” and **ARL's** “Research Library Leadership Fellows.” But the very formality of these initiatives bespeaks an underlying belief that our generation's methods and values must be passed on — that somehow leaders won't “emerge” on their own, with their own methods and values. They might well do so without much help, if there were need and room enough!

We grizzled veterans have to consider that we may be part of the problem.

This year's **TAIGA 2** meeting experimented with an “unconference” approach known as Open Space. (<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?>). While a fascinating and effective experience in itself, that's a story for another time. One of the process's few rules is known as “The Law of Two Feet.” Under that law, participants ask themselves two questions throughout the day: Am I learning? Am I contributing? If the answer to both questions is “No,” the participant exercises “The Law of Two Feet” and moves on to another session

— or outside for a walk and a latte.

There's a lesson for all librarians here, but perhaps especially for us boomers. To stay in the game, we need to apply that law to our activities every day: Are we contributing? Are we learning? If not, it's time to get up and go. 🐾

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