My Experience as a Bridge

by Sandra Shell

The word “interim” means “an interval of time between one period or phase and another.” In many situations, an interim director or manager is someone who serves as a bridge, or “someone that provides a link, connection, or means of coming together.”

I had the privilege of serving as interim director of my library system for six months. This appointment occurred two weeks after I completed the Virginia Library Leadership Academy. I entered my new role fresh with the many ideas and insights into good leadership that I had just learned at the academy. I am happy to report that I was able to apply much of the information presented by Dr. Robert Burgin, president of RB Software and Consulting Firm, who conducted the program. Though I lay no claim to being an expert on good leadership, I hope to share my thoughts and experiences and reinforce to myself the type of leader I strive to be.

We are each surrounded by different circumstances and factors in our daily personal and professional lives. It is important for us to realize what our situations are; they may not be the best of all possibilities, but we have to accept them and move forward. No matter what we undertake, we must do the very best we can.

Upon the retirement of the former director, I was appointed interim director of a library system of six locations, in addition to continuing as branch manager of one of the library branches. I quickly learned that being interim director involved more stress and difficulty than I had imagined.

I am certainly no authority on leadership, and I have made and will continue to make my share of mistakes. But in looking back over my six months, I realize that I indeed gave it my best effort, and I look back proudly at the accomplishments and successes that I experienced. Now I’d like to share some of the things that I learned make for good leadership.

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Get informed and understand the situation.

Before taking any action, learn as much as possible about the current status of your organization. I was fortunate to have worked in my system over ten years and be very familiar with the community we serve. Through the years and stages of advancement, I have worked in several positions, so I know firsthand the requirements and challenges that many of the staff face on a day-to-day basis. However, as leader, I needed to look at the system as a whole and analyze our current status. Our system had experienced some bad publicity during the last several months, and tensions were high among many of the staff. We also continued to experience harsh economic conditions, along with most of our area.

“If you want to be seen as a leader, be seen!”

This is a direct quote from Robert Burgin at the Leadership Academy. I spent as much time as possible during my first two weeks meeting with staff individually and talking with them on a one-to-one basis. I learned what issues and concerns they faced. I conducted a confidential survey in which I asked: 1) Do you have concerns or complaints about our library? 2) Do you have suggestions for improvement for staff relations and patron service? 3) Name at least one good thing about our library. I was amazed at the amount of thought staff put into their responses. I read them carefully and prepared a written response that I gave to all staff. I then held a staff meeting to further discuss the issues. Improvement did not take place overnight. But soon both the staff and the public noticed—and commented on—an improved atmosphere at the library and less tense staff!

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Set a good example by following the Golden Rule.

I encouraged department supervisors and managers to compliment their staff. It doesn’t take a long conversation to say “You’re doing a great job,” “You handled that problem patron very nicely,” or “Thank you for your assistance.” We all like to feel appreciated. Surveys have shown that performance improves when workers receive appreciation and praise. However, do not offer compliments or praise lightly. Let your own actions and attitude show the staff that you are sincere. Try to focus on the assets of the staff and library system. I found it very helpful to be personally involved with all areas of the library whenever possible. At times during the day, when I saw that the circulation department was short-staffed due to absences or during the lunch breaks, I would stop by and assist at customer service. During the absence of the courier, I volunteered to make the deliveries for that day. Doing such tasks allowed me to converse with staff at their own level. I also reaped the added benefit of getting to know these people better, and as a result have developed closer friendships with many of my coworkers.

Be willing to tackle whatever task is needed.

Let the staff know you are willing to take on any library-related task, whether it is cleaning the children’s area, dealing with a disgruntled patron, or emptying the trashcans. I have always had a tendency to go “above and beyond” any job description. Yes, I do have a personal life, which often is quite busy. But sometimes at work we see something that needs to be done. Rather than ignore it or find someone else to tackle the chore, it is often easier to just do it yourself. Be assured that someone is always watching you, so you are setting a good example by not feeling too important to do the most menial tasks. I had been at the new location for about a month when I discovered two storage areas that were quite a “hoarder’s delight.” Things had just accumulated over the years, and no one had taken the responsibility of organizing or cleaning out these areas. One Friday, I announced that another staff member and I were going to tackle the mess. By the end of the day, we had created accessible areas and discovered many items that would later be put to use. Within the next two days, staff in other areas of the building were cleaning their work areas and organizing their spaces. But the highest benefit was that staff were working together, laughing, talking, and complimenting each other. These workdays helped to improve staff relations and bring about a more relaxed attitude.

Be available to all staff.

Listen to other people’s suggestions. Make it known that you are available to listen to concerns as well as suggestions for improvements. If you see a potential problem developing, don’t hesitate to address it. Many times, people just need to have a sounding board to let them vent their feelings. When difficult situations arise, listen to all viewpoints. Assess the circumstances and attempt mediation. Show empathy when necessary and be diplomatic. If there are corrections or disciplinary issues that need addressing, do so in a private meeting. Try not to embarrass anyone. Make suggestions for improvement and emphasize the positive. Set the example of maintaining composure. People are watching your reactions, and your behavior is often more influential that any well-worded speech. Let the staff know that they are important and you are interested in their opinions.

Manage your time and tasks.

I quickly learned that handling two jobs at the same time was a true balancing act. I had to set priorities and keep lists of what had to be done. Keep your calendar up-to-date with all appointments, meetings, and deadlines. At the beginning of each day, I spent time reviewing my calendar. I then made a list for that day of what I had to accomplish, what I could work on but not complete, and which long-term projects did not need my immediate attention. When meeting with staff, either informally or in meetings, keep on task. Don’t get distracted. If a staff member needs some private time for conversation, suggestions, or discussing problems, keep the conversation moving. Don’t allow yourself to get drawn into matters that are not work-related. However, it is important for your personal sanity to take a break and clear your thoughts. I discovered that if I stayed in my office even during my lunch hour, I kept working or thinking about the task at hand. Further, if staff saw me relaxing in my office, they would drop in to talk. The best route for me was to leave the building for lunch. Some days I chose a local restaurant; other times, I packed my lunch and had a picnic. Just driving to...
another location, finding a quiet spot, and maybe reading while I ate my sandwich gave me renewed insight when I returned to the office.

Along with time management, another important lesson is to be as organized as possible. I realize we each have different views on how to file information, whether in folders on the computer or in actual filing cabinets. I have always kept the folders at my office labeled and in chronological order. When I first became interim director, I had difficulty understanding where to find the information I needed in the director’s office. It took about a week to go through the cabinets, locate needed materials, and bring order to the files. I then realized that even though I am very organized and have everything labeled, I should make notes for my successor. I set up a folder that gives brief descriptions of where pertinent materials can be found. I am sure it does not cover all questions, but hopefully it will make things easier and clearer.

**Seek help and assistance.**

No one person can have all the answers or know how to do everything. I received a lot of help from other staff members within my system. I did not hesitate to ask other directors whenever there was something I did not understand or know. Thankfully, there is a listserv for Virginia library directors that provided input from other, more knowledgeable people. The Virginia Library Association also offers wonderful opportunities to network with library staff throughout the state and gain from their perspectives and experiences. I appreciate all the wonderful responses to my requests for assistance and help. In addition to suggestions and solutions, I also received support and kind words of encouragement.

My term as interim director was short. It was just a temporary assignment. But there are many things in life that are temporary. I am confident that I applied my best efforts to this endeavor, and I am proud of my accomplishments and successes. I also am thankful for the time I spent in this position, which taught me many new facts and processes.

I try to take advantage of each chapter in my life as an opportunity and a learning experience. I intend to continue to do my best in any situation and keep in mind these ideas about what makes a good leader. This article has not only allowed me to share my thoughts and experiences with others, but also, more importantly, to remind myself of what I have learned.