How Transformational Leadership Translates into Recognized Excellence in Academic Libraries

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The Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University was the recipient of the 2011 Excellence in Academic Libraries Award from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The ACRL award committee noted how the mission and programming of the library effectively matched the institution’s goals. This resulted from leadership that encouraged creativity, autonomy, experimentation, and unified the organization to help faculty, students, and staff succeed.

In the last few decades, the Z. Smith Reynolds Library (ZSR) at Wake Forest University has had a strong service orientation and a high employee retention rate. This retention rate served as a foundation for the more recent deliberate and explicit emphasis on service. However, it also created the development of a bunker mentality after years of budget cuts, salary compression, and an increasingly outdated building. All of the energy went into sustaining existing, traditional, and reliable services. While these services were valued, the faculty perceived the library more in a supporting role rather than as an integral part of the academic mission of the institution.

That culture changed in 2004, when Dr. Lynn Sutton came from Wayne State University to become the new director of ZSR Library. Arriving at Wake Forest University, she quickly adapted to a smaller private institution with an ethos of personal connection to students. Sutton listened to students and staff and began to make incremental changes based on their stated needs. Students felt comfortable approaching Sutton and requests came through student government as well as from individuals. Library staff had a multitude of opportunities to provide input. Sutton overcame the longstanding mentality of ‘making do’ by fearlessly
asking university administrators for more resources, while emphasizing that those resources would benefit the students and faculty. One success led to another as the staff responded with trust, new ideas, and a willingness to change. Because Sutton championed changes in service, whether proposed by staff or students, the overall environment changed to one where constant improvement was desirable and exciting.

Sutton’s leadership catalyzed the Z. Smith Reynolds Library organization into applying for the 2011 Excellence in Academic Libraries Award from the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). In announcing ZSR as the winner, ACRL recognized that, “The selection committee was impressed with the strong alignment of the library to institutional values and ambitions as evidence [sic] through the variety of programs developed to support and foster student learning....The Z. Smith Reynolds Library is a catalyst bringing together faculty, students and staff. The library values and celebrates its employees whose teamwork creates the energy and vitality evidence [sic] in their application.”¹ The authors will review the ways a new leadership perspective permeated the library employees’ work ethic, generating a metamorphosis of ZSR’s services, building, and role in the university.

**Literature Review**

In searching the literature first on leadership in general, the authors determined that the metamorphosis at ZSR was brought about by a style of leadership known as transformational leadership. The term “transformational leadership” appeared in literature in the field of education as early as the 1920’s and is currently defined as “A leadership style that involves generating a vision for the organization and inspiring followers to meet the challenges that it sets. Transformational leadership depends on the leader’s ability to appeal to the higher values
and motives of followers and to inspire a feeling of loyalty and trust.”² A search of the literature for peer reviewed articles specifically on transformational leadership, and limited to those written during ZSR’s period of transformation, revealed elements matching Sutton’s style at ZSR. Townley wrote with a focus “on the use of transformational leadership in technological university libraries.”³ He stated that transformational leadership is the least-used of three methods of addressing change, but “is the one change method which library leaders and workers can apply directly in any situation.”⁴ In describing transformational leadership, Townley provided a case study for each of five practices, identified earlier by Kouzes and Posner: (1) modeling the way; (2) inspiring a shared vision; (3) challenging the process; (4) enabling others to act; and (5) encouraging the heart.⁵ Smith conducted a survey of library school students and asserted that the Kouzes and Posner practices can be taught.⁶ Mavrinac, drawing from works by Kotter as well as by Kezar and Eckel, viewed transformational leadership through the lens of peer mentoring, and in her literature review significantly notes that, “There is a strong relationship between the success of the change initiative and its alignment with the existing organizational culture.”⁷

Hernan and Rossiter apply the newer lens of Daniel Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence (EI) in researching the successful traits of library leaders, and in comparing EI to transformational leadership, find similarities. They explain that transformational leaders:

- “have special skills that allow them to provide a supportive environment while motivating followers to higher levels of personal action. A transformational leader inspires the members of the organization to achieve more than they thought possible.”

- “maximize the needs of followers,” meaning that, “By appealing to higher-order needs, the transformational leader generates subordinate commitment to achieving the organizational mission.”
• “empower their followers due to their ability to translate intention into reality and sustain it for the followers. This empowerment puts duality into motion; empowerment creates more empowerment, which in turn creates more power and allows followers to achieve their potential.”

• “are passionate about their roles, tasks, responsibilities, and obligations to their staff. They forget their personal problems, lose a sense of time, and feel competent and in control. Without passion, there is no direction and vision is short-lived.”

“In reviewing the literature on transformational leadership, the following traits appear consistently: acting creatively, acting interactively (with vision), being empowered, passionate, and ethical.”

Vision and empowerment are elements common to the style of leadership described by Kouzes and Posner and the one described by Hernan and Rossiter. Parallels could be drawn between “challenging the process” and “acting creatively.” Similarly, “encouraging the heart” could be construed to have the same effect upon followers as being passionate. Lastly “modeling the way” and being “ethical” both embodied the idea of leading by example, or ‘walking the talk.’

Beginnings of Change, Sparked at the Top

Early in the tenure of the new director of ZSR Library, students asked, as they had been asking for a while, for the library to stay open more hours. The library had only been open until midnight Sunday through Thursday nights when a committee of the University’s student government approached Sutton with a request to extend library hours to one a.m. Prior to Sutton’s arrival, stated obstacles included lack of money for new staff, security risk, and anticipation of added cost in support of only a few students. But Sutton’s approach of “let’s try
to find a way to say yes before we say no” resulted in the ability to achieve the students’ desire.

One of the night staff was willing to shift his schedule to end at one a.m. Sutton had challenged the status quo, acted creatively, and fulfilled the students’ wishes without additional resources. This act was the first example of a driving philosophy of Sutton’s, and an inspiring and empowering new perspective for the rest of the library leaders.

In the spring of 2006, Sutton wanted to keep the library open for twenty-four hours a day during exam week (a practice initiated at the Undergraduate Library at Wayne State some years before), which required additional staffing and shifting staff hours. First, Sutton modeled the way, volunteering to stay extra hours and issuing a call for four other volunteers to stay overnight. Thirty people stepped forward. Such an overwhelming response epitomized the alignment between change and the longstanding service culture of the organization and how Sutton’s modeling the requested behavior affected the ability to make the change. One staff member, inspired by these events, took initiative and solicited local restaurants to donate food, enabling ZSR to provide students a study break with food each night and coffee at all hours for the entire week. With the willingness of the library employees to relax the policy prohibiting food and drink in the library, the library culture changed. The event was dubbed “Wake the Library,” and the building filled to capacity. That success energized staff and students alike. Staff were impressed by the students’ expressions of appreciation as they went through the food line and by the good will the event engendered long it was over.

The successful initial event, originally supported by Sutton, encouraged the heart as much as it challenged the status quo for the rest of the organization, and enabled the staff to be courageous in suggesting and implementing even more change. Shortly afterwards, the food
prohibition policy was permanently retired, which raised some concern among staff initially, but confidence increased as feared bug infestations failed to materialize. Ending the “no food” policy was a conscious attempt to make the library a more welcoming place for students, faculty, and staff all year long, not just during exam week.

“Wake the Library” was repeated for the exam weeks of Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, providing the necessary data to recommend a permanent change to remain open twenty-four hours a day for five days a week. The extended hours began in February 2008, after Sutton was able to repurpose a vacant position into an overnight supervisor and funding for a Security Guard was arranged by Provost Jill Tiefenthaler, who had just arrived in July 2007. This change in hours showed students again that the library staff cared about them above and beyond traditional service, and simultaneously informed the staff that significant change was possible.

At the same time as those ideas were implemented, a strategic planning process in the library and in the university was underway in 2006-2007. Teams and individuals across the library began to think big, transformative ideas, enabling others to act because they were encouraged that new ideas that helped students and staff would be vigorously explored, pursued, and supported. The planning process generated a clear, easily-remembered vision and mission:

**Vision:** The Z. Smith Reynolds Library will be the first and favorite source for Wake Forest users in their quest for knowledge.

**Mission:** The mission of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library is to help our students, faculty and staff succeed.  

The primary focus of the mission on the success of our students, faculty, and staff is the one that resonated with library staff when Sutton suggested it spontaneously during a staff meeting.
and inspired the shared vision. The immediate and enthusiastic reception confirmed that the statement had the desired impact.

Sutton displayed the traits of transformational leadership with her passion for the vision and the mission, which unified the staff in an explicit expression of purpose that matched well with an existing service-oriented culture.

**Continuing Change: Transformational Ideas Begin to Come from Functional Teams**

A primary part of the strategic plan developed in 2006-2007 focused on identifying renovations that would enable better use of the library. The students’ renewed enthusiasm for the library generated from both the “Wake the Library” initiative and the extended hours caused building usage to skyrocket, but the original fifty-year old building and the fifteen-year old addition were showing age. Sutton and Provost Tiefenthaler, a transformational leader herself, forged a strong relationship, and together they realized a longtime dream of many: a coffee shop in the library. Sutton and Tiefenthaler shared the vision and the Provost allocated funds to renovate two worn cinder-block study rooms, one on each side of the main entrance to ZSR. By Fall 2008, one room was converted to a Starbucks and the other to a 24-hour study room with a graduate student lounge attached, both styled in warm, inviting earth tones with comfortable seating. Students, faculty, and staff flocked to the new spaces and the Starbucks quickly became the central meeting spot for the campus.

This remarkable transformation galvanized others to brainstorm ways to make existing spaces more user-friendly and both inspired the vision and challenged long standing-processes. For example, the Research and Instruction group downsized and relocated current periodicals and microtext collections, which opened up two large rooms for student study space. The
university leadership proposed renovating two other spaces to make room for non-library units that meshed well with the ZSR mission: The University Writing Center and the Information Systems Help Desk. These moves placed these services more conveniently, as so many students already frequented the library building. These renovation projects encouraged all library employees to think more expansively.

In a highly ambitious plan, members of the Access Services Team visualized renovating another space into a 120-seat auditorium and an adjoining media room for the DVD collection. This change would not only provide a much-needed meeting and presentation space but also would remove the barrier of students having to request media items from closed stacks. With the Dean championing the ideas of the staff, and support from the Provost, the dream was realized in fall 2011.

These successful projects took an immense amount of planning, relocation of people and resources, and countless hours of staff time. What the significant projects (Starbucks, the new study spaces, and the auditorium and media center) all had in common was that the initial ideas came from below rather than from the senior leadership. All library teams were thinking about making the library better for our students, faculty, and staff and were being encouraged and rewarded for doing so, gaining inspiration while seeing results and receiving positive feedback from the community. The library became a destination: the daily gate count more than doubled, rising from 1281 in fiscal year 2007 to 3015 in fiscal year 2011.

While the above-mentioned changes were big, no idea was too small if it would help students succeed. Leading from the heart and recognizing the challenges that students have to overcome to succeed, the Technology Team and Access Services Team worked together to
increase the types and numbers of equipment available for students to check out: power supplies, power strips, microphones, cameras, Nooks, Kindles, and iPads. Power strips were far more significant than they might seem, because the lack of outlets in the building had been a top complaint both in survey results and anecdotally. The iPads were wildly successful, resulting in queues so long that additional units had to be purchased to keep up with demand. Show and tell sessions encouraged faculty to ask questions and later led to a panel discussion to help faculty understand differences in the various types of e-books and e-readers.

A member of the Technology team had the unorthodox idea to hold video game nights in ZSR after closing time on Fridays. For the three following years, “Get Game @ ZSR” was a great success, trumped only by even more popular games that began in 2010 of “Capture the Flag” and “Humans vs. Zombies.” Both of these games were suggested by outside groups. “Capture the Flag” came from Residence Life and Housing employees who wanted a fun event for new students on the first weekend after classes began and just needed a venue. “Humans vs. Zombies” was arranged at the request of a ZSR student worker who lamented the fact that students who loved playing this game kept getting ejected from other campus buildings. Because the library had provided such a welcoming space to the students, they felt both sufficiently comfortable and inspired to suggest even more non-traditional uses for the library, challenging the process and enabling others to act. The precedent of using ZSR for recreational student space had been set, and the library’s leadership swiftly agreed to these later requests because the culture had already changed.
Sutton’s examples of success with “Wake the Library” and the coffee shop inspired creativity, autonomy, and experimentation, and staff were motivated to execute this multitude of successful ideas with wide-ranging impact.

**Continuing Change: Transforming ZSR’s Role in the University**

The students clearly began to view the Library as more than a place to study, socialize, and get research materials. Students were not the only focus of transformational efforts, however. Library employees actively worked to embed themselves and library services into the academic and intellectual life of the campus, as well as increasing involvement in the community of the campus overall.

Early in her tenure, Sutton had shared the vision for the library to serve as not only as a study space, but also as a meeting place where ideas, current events, and research could be discussed. One staff member, as Chair of the Marketing Committee, was empowered to start the Library Lecture Series with a few events in 2006, bringing in faculty to talk about their research and other projects. As the popularity of the series increased, faculty and other units on campus asked to be included and the number of lectures more than tripled in seven years. That same year, building on the success of the Lecture Series, library staff organized a dinner celebrating the year’s accomplishments by the university’s authors, editors, and fine and performing artists. This event, paid for by the Provost’s office but coordinated and hosted by ZSR, has become an annual event, intrinsically associated with the library and much appreciated by the faculty. Both of these staff-run programs, while labor intensive, advantageously positioned ZSR librarians as partners engaged in the scholarly enterprise.
The ZSR librarians, with the assistance of staff, had been teaching the for-credit Introduction to Information Literacy class (LIB100) since 2002. In 2007, of their own volition, Research and Instruction Team members, eager to assist students majoring and minoring in their own areas of subject expertise, developed subject-specific upper level courses. With the addition of these new courses, and as the number of classes in the LIB100 program increased, not only the university faculty, but also the students began to perceive librarians more as faculty. Several librarians also volunteered to become university academic advisers to freshmen and sophomore students. These initiatives demonstrated how librarians had become both passionate and empowered to achieve their full potential.

The Library Lecture Series and faculty author dinner, along with the addition of the upper-level classes, began the process of transforming the Library’s image with faculty. Another turning point in that process came with a change in the library’s placement on the university’s organizational chart. When Sutton arrived, she reported to the Vice President for Student Life, who had a Master of Library Science degree himself. As this was not a typical reporting line in higher education, Sutton began reporting to Tiefenthaler, the still relatively new Provost, in 2007. Reporting to the chief academic officer for the university provided the library with much greater academic visibility and better access to logical funding channels.

Also in 2007, at the suggestion of Sutton, the professional librarians began a discussion about obtaining faculty status. Analysis, deliberation, and decision-making were left solely to librarians, and with support from the Provost, in July 2009, librarians became self-governing faculty. By then, University faculty already saw librarians as partners in teaching and scholarship, and the change was met not with mere acceptance, but with real enthusiasm.
Sutton, previously titled Director, became a dean, and library faculty gained visibility and voice in the workings of the university through new representation on the University Senate, Dean’s Council, the Institutional Review Board, and a representative on the search committee for a new provost in 2011.

In sum, ZSR librarians have become an integral part of the academic mission of the institution and interact with university faculty in a far more collegial manner now than was the case in 2004. Sutton’s vision regarding ZSR’s role in the university and the empowerment stemming from all of the previously described successes up to 2009 led to this significant overall transformation in ZSR’s role in the university.

**Higher Levels of Personal Action**

Hernan and Rossiter identified traits of transformational leaders that “allow them to provide a supportive environment while motivating followers to higher levels of personal action.” ZSR’s Librarians and library staff have often committed to giving a little extra time and talent to make the library and the university a better place. For example, the “Wake the Library 5K and Fun Run,” an annual event held each fall from 2008-2010, raised money for the “Wake the Library” event described above. In another example, responding to University-wide appeals for volunteers to assist with building for Habitat for Humanity, eight to ten ZSR staff have formed a group each year for several years. Yet another group has helped to raise money for the Brian Piccolo Cancer Fund annually by running in the University’s “Hit the Bricks” fundraiser. Library staff have volunteered routinely to answer phones during the on-campus National Public Radio station’s pledge drives. Some of these traditions originated before Sutton’s arrival, underscoring Mavrinac’s assertion alignment with the existing culture enables the success of a
change initiative. Dean Sutton’s continuing support enabled these stronger ties with the university and the surrounding community.

Stronger ties have formed within the library as well. Project teams have become typically cross-departmental, and even individual members of the various functional teams have begun to check with members of other teams when thinking of implementing change to better analyze “ripple effects” and to develop solutions more quickly. A “culture of collaboration” has enabled everyone to ask questions without fear of judgment. The resulting relationships across the traditional functional silos have better enabled ZSR employees to share problems, strategies, and successes beyond the walls of those silos.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Once the perspective of ZSR staff was unified behind a common goal (expressed in the mission), it brought about remarkable change. “Wake the Library” began as a creative attempt to meet needs of the students and quickly became a beloved tradition, so that it is now proudly included by university student guides in their tours for prospective students. For ZSR, Wake the Library embodied the focus on meeting the needs of the students even at the expense of employee comfort (e.g. being “too old to stay up all night”). The price was paid voluntarily, inspired by Dean Sutton’s leading from the heart. The strategic plan for the library, published in the spring of 2007, was deliberately and directly mapped to the discrete parts of the university’s strategic plan of 2006. These plans served primarily as a framework, and the leaders in the Library generated mission-focused change in that context, with flexibility and speed. They were supported by a culture that rewarded creative thinking, allowed for failure, and encouraged all members of the staff to strive continually to find new ways to help
students, faculty, and staff succeed. Working in a library where employees can say “yes” is more enjoyable than operating within policies requiring employees to say “no.”

It sounds deceptively simple that transformational leadership spread like wildfire, reframing ZSR’s mission and mindset, then significantly changing the way we worked, but this is what happened. The resulting transformations to the services, building, and the library’s role in the university, a few of which were initiated at the top, some from middle management, and some from staff, ultimately led to the honor of winning the ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award in 2011.

How can ZSR employees sustain the innovative atmosphere? Four principles common to organizations that innovate successfully are:

1. A commitment to controlling their environments rather than the other way around.
2. An internal structure that creates the freedom to imagine.
3. Leadership that prepares the organization to innovate.
4. Management systems that serve the mission of the organization rather than the other way around.¹⁶

As more people at ZSR try new things in the effort to meet the needs of their community and feel supported, encouraged by success, and undaunted by failure, they find the innovative spirit and the desire to implement change.

Notes

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
11. Ibid.