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## ***What Does it Mean to Lead in the International Library World?***

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*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together!*

*African proverb*

### **Introduction**

My foray into international library leadership began in 2001 with the South African Library Leadership Project (SALLP), which was a partnership project between the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. This groundbreaking 3-year project was made possible by a grant of \$249,000 from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. It succeeded in bringing together organizations and individuals on the basis of a national need and a common goal, namely to address the development of leadership skills of senior and middle managers of library services in South Africa.

LIASA at this time was still a relatively young library association, as it was constituted in 1997 after a lengthy process of discussions and negotiations among the former racially segregated library associations and organizations. The library and information services (LIS) sector was also a sector that had felt the impact of apartheid. Separate services and facilities, training of librarians, management and leadership based on race, are factors that impacted upon a sector that had a 150 year legacy and fairly sophisticated national infrastructure. Post-1994, which was the watershed year for South African democracy, saw the sudden urgency for transformation and implementation of employment equity, especially at management levels, within all sectors. The LIS sector also felt the reverberations of this transformation force—librarians were appointed to leadership and management positions for which they were ill-equipped. This gave rise to frustrations, tensions in the workplace and a mindset that created a barrier to service delivery.

For the LIS sector, the South African Library Leadership

Project presented itself at the right time and was located in the right organization, LIASA. During the period 2001-2004, 23 senior and middle managers of public and academic library services were selected through an open, merit process for participation in a six to eight week leadership training program at the Mortenson Center. They now constitute a national resource pool of LIS professionals who are making a noticeable impact upon LIASA and the profession.

What emerged during these four years was a strong partnership not only between two organizations, but also between the individuals who lead the project in both countries. This proverb therefore effectively encapsulates the essence of what it has meant to work within the arena of international library leadership, based predominantly on partnerships.

This paper serves as an acknowledgement of my colleagues Barbara Ford and especially Susan Schnuer, with whom I worked from the very outset of the SALLP project. Susan and I subsequently jointly developed and presented a paper entitled “International Partnership, National Impact: The South African Library Leadership Project” at the 6th World Conference on Continuing Professional Development & Workplace Learning for Library and Information Professionals held in Oslo, Norway in August 2005. This paper will highlight aspects of the Oslo paper, and will pay particular focus on the elements of a successful partnership, which inadvertently leads one toward professional leadership.

## Individual Leadership

During the course of my involvement with the SALLP, my engagement with external partners, LIASA leadership, South African stakeholders, and the participants themselves gave me the opportunity to identify those qualities and characteristics that are essential for individuals within a successful and effective partnership. It is also based on the observation of how people behave within familiar and new environments. Individual leadership certainly evolves itself based on the inclusion of these qualities and characteristics:

1. **Vision** – Today most organizations and institutions base themselves on a vision, mission, goals and strategies. So, too, should an individual have a vision of where s/he is heading as a professional! It enables one to engage in work that derives both job satisfaction and job security.
2. **Understanding the sector** – It is not only about doing one’s job but also about growing within a chosen profession. Keeping abreast with current trends and developments enables one to know and understand the sector within which one works.
3. **Values** – Personal values define who you are as an individual and permeate one’s conduct and environment. Within the context of a partnership, some of the core values are accountability, discipline, respect, professionalism, initiative and integrity.
4. **Passion** – The emotional and intellectual enthusiasm for what you do or believe in.
5. **Interpersonal skills** – The ability to communicate effectively with individuals and to manage a range of relationships simultaneously and effectively.
6. **Access to resources** – This refers very much to access to technology, information, facilities, etc.
7. **Willingness to learn/to share** – This is an ability to acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning, irrespective of one’s position. Individual leadership is enhanced by the ability to transfer one’s knowledge and skills to others.
8. **Personal commitment** – The ability to commit to the full term of a task or project is an indicator of emotional and professional maturity.

9. **Recognition of your and others' roles** – This is an acknowledgement of the strengths, responsibilities and capabilities of others within a team.

An individual embracing these qualities and characteristics becomes a proactive and strong participant within a partnership or team.

### **Team Leadership**

The initial stages of the project threw up many barriers such as geographical distance, language, “developed vs. developing” issues, resources, management styles, professional mindsets and attitudes. It was certainly a challenge with both partners based on two continents! However, the synchronicity of thought and common purpose were recognised very early in the project and this prevented these barriers from becoming entrenched. During the course of the project, as we began sharing certain elements and took individual responsibility of others, what emerged were distinctive team leadership qualities and characteristics, which also reflected positively on the personalities of the individuals involved. It became a synergy between the individual and team!

The team leadership qualities and characteristics that emerged were:

- Recognition and acknowledgement of differences/needs
- Shared vision
- Mutual respect, understanding & trust
- Ability to compromise
- Members share a stake in both process & outcome
- Multiple layers of participation
- Flexibility
- Clear roles & policy guidelines
- Adaptability
- Open and frequent communication
- Informal relationships & communication links

Successful partnerships occur when partners are recognised as leaders in the field. This happens when there is a proven record of accomplishment, success, delivery or expertise. The SALLP proved itself a success, it delivered on its expectations, the expertise of the partners varied but effectively meshed, and the accomplishments of the participants thereafter endorsed the relevance of the project.

### **Elements of a successful partnership**

Library leadership has become a more focused area of professional development. Several national and international initiatives have emerged. Results have varied from success to failure. It is therefore important to share those elements that foster success but which could contribute to failure if misinterpreted or mishandled. These elements are:

#### ***Environment***

- History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
- Collaborative group seen as legitimate leader in the community
- Favorable political and social climate

### **Membership**

- Mutual respect, understanding & trust
- Appropriate cross-section of members
- Members see collaboration in their self-interest
- Ability to compromise

### **Process & Structure**

- Members share a stake in both process & outcome
- Multiple layers of participation
- Flexibility
- Clear roles & policy guidelines
- Adaptability
- Appropriate pace of development

### **Communication**

- Open and frequent communication
- Informal relationships & communication links

### **Purpose**

- Concrete, attainable goals & objectives
- Shared vision
- Unique purpose

### **Elements - Resources**

- Sufficient funds, staff, materials & time
- Skilled leadership

In addition to the above, the additional lessons learned from the SALLP for successful partnerships are:

- ***Mutual respect for cultural differences and an understanding of local conditions and needs.***  
Every organization has its own culture that is built over time, based on its mission, its practices, its people, its governing values, its traditions, and its institutional history. It is important to acknowledge and understand different organizational cultures, to respect them, and to find ways that these realities can contribute to and strengthen the mutual endeavor.
- ***A willingness to learn and operate in a different environment.***  
This includes the acknowledgement of local expertise and consultation with a wide range of individuals and/or groups who live in and intimately know local conditions. The most successful partnerships recognize and value their differences and find ways to integrate them into a workable overarching partnership culture.
- ***Breaking down obstacles.***  
Major obstacles to a constructive and successful partnership include:
  - conflict over key interests;
  - a lack of clear purpose;
  - unrealistic goals or deadlines;
  - key interests and stakeholders, including decision makers, that are not included or refuse to participate;

- unequal benefits for the partners;
  - some participants with more power than others;
  - financial and time commitments that outweigh potential benefits;
  - partnership members who are uncomfortable with the commitments required;
  - constitutional issues or legal precedents which constrain the partnership.
- The ability to identify areas of potential conflict at the outset of a project and the sensitive handling of obstacles when and if these do arise, are essential skills that help to prevent the dissolution of a potentially effective partnership.
  - ***Celebrating success.***  
Successful partnerships look for every opportunity to celebrate individual project successes or key benchmarks in the evolution of the partnership. Such celebrations allow the partners to recognize good work being done that reinforces the goals of the partnership; to gain some outside recognition of the partnership; and/or to demonstrate possibilities for the partnership to grow. Recognizing and celebrating accomplishments helps motivate and spur people on to new challenges. It is a lost opportunity when it does not occur. If one's goal is to build greater awareness of the partnership, then the partners need to take every opportunity to celebrate each other's success.

## Conclusion

Successful partnerships develop over time and have the potential to become long-term relationships. Based on the limited resources of individual institutions, partnerships are emerging as the favoured route for further development. I recommend that to become a leader in the field, one should learn from others, share with others and embrace those elements that promote success, mutual professional respect and growth. You will then certainly travel far together!