

Define Leader: The Definition and Development of Law Librarians as Leaders*

Barbara L. Mackoff**

Dr. Mackoff reports the results of a survey conducted with forty longtime and forty emergent law librarians about the behaviors and strengths that define leadership and how leadership can be developed. She provides some suggestions as to how individual law librarians and AALL can enhance leadership qualities in themselves and the profession.

“I do not think that librarians think of themselves as leaders. My colleagues are just too passive when it comes to fighting for what they need for their libraries. They take what is dished out and whine and complain that they are not respected by their organizations.”—*Law firm librarian for twenty-five years*

“The best [think of themselves as leaders] because they recognize the importance of legal information to the justice system, legal education, and knowledge. They also recognize the constantly changing environment and are not afraid to adapt and take on new roles to redefine our profession and keep it central.”—*Academic librarian for nineteen years*

“In my experience, half of them picked this field so they could hide from other humans and the other half picked it because they have inherent leadership qualities and a strong commitment to the fundamental values of librarians that allows them to be leaders.”—*Law firm librarian for seven years.*

¶1 Raise your hand if you agree with one—or all—of the statements above. Leadership development is a top priority of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Strategic Plan.¹ As a direct result, in 2008 the first AALL Leadership Fellows were chosen, and they participated in a two-day leadership development seminar called “Taking the Lead: The Eight Signatures of Leadership.”² In addition, the AALL research agenda has posed the question: What are the characteristics of an effective leader in [our] profession?³

¶2 A national qualitative study, funded by AALL and conducted with eighty law librarians, was designed to begin to answer this question and to create a model with

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** Visiting Professor, Adelphi University, Garden City, New York.

1. AM. ASS'N OF LAW LIBRARIES, 2005–2010 STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS (2005), available at http://www.aallnet.org/strategic/strategic_direction-2005-2010.pdf.

2. For more information about the seminar, see Theresa Leming, *I Took the Lead*, AALL SPECTRUM, Mar. 2009, at 20.

3. Am. Ass'n of Law Libraries, AALL Research Agenda (Sep. 10, 2000).

two dimensions. First, the study sought to define the unique characteristics of leadership in the role of law librarian. The second was to identify the experiences, strengths, and knowledge base associated with the development of leadership in the field. The data resides in the words of eighty librarians, both seasoned and emerging in the field, who offered provocative, pithy, mirthful, and wise perspectives about the challenges and competencies of law library leadership.⁴

Objectives, Activities, and Research Methods

¶3 The focus of the study was to create models of leadership for law librarians by harvesting evaluative data from e-mail survey questionnaires with a sample of eighty law librarians selected from the AALL membership database. Their demographics appear in figure 1. Librarians were chosen at random from two categories: those with ten or more years of experience and those with five or fewer years' experience. E-mails inviting participation in the survey were sent to several hundred librarians on the list. The forty respondents selected in each category were those who were the first to respond to the e-mail. Those who wanted to participate completed the survey and returned it via e-mail.

¶4 The forty participants with ten or more years of experience were designated as "Longtime Librarians." The average number of years for this group was 26.5. They answered Instrument #1,⁵ and the other forty participants, defined as "Emergent Librarians," with five or fewer years in the field, answered Instrument #2.⁶ The average number of years in the field for this group was 3.5.

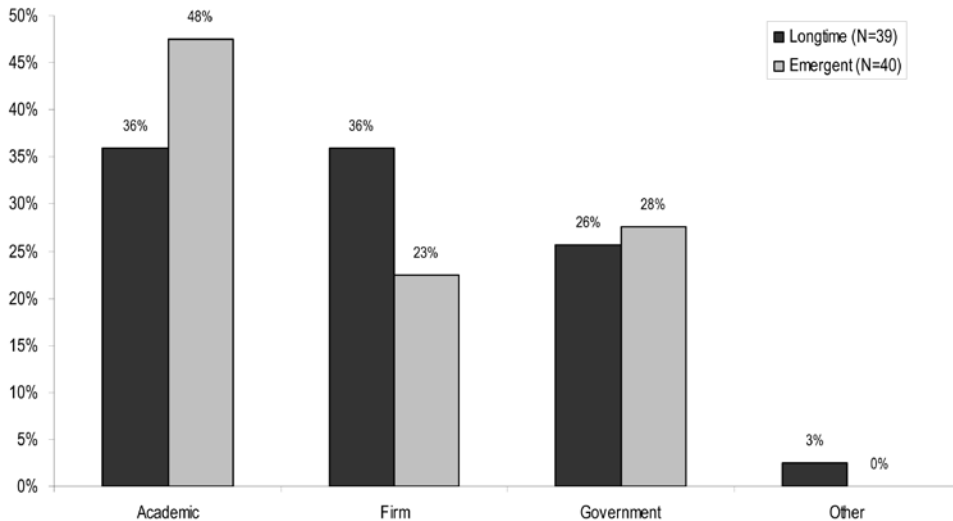


Figure 1. Proportion of Librarians Working in Library Types

4. All survey results are on file with the author.

5. See *infra* appendix A.

6. See *infra* appendix B.

¶5 Both survey questionnaires consisted of open-ended, guided questions, weighted toward an “appreciative inquiry” approach developed by David Cooperrider.⁷ This approach emphasizes asking positive questions to discover the factors that make individuals and organizations most effective and constructive.

¶6 Questions for the Longtime Librarians emphasized the opportunity to reflect on competencies for leadership and those they might have found useful as a fledgling member of profession. The Emergent Librarian questions sought to determine which situations they believed called for leadership, what competencies they thought they needed to step into leadership, and what they would want to learn. Both surveys included two future-oriented questions, designed to ask participants to imagine the steps and strategies that would lead to the desired outcome of leadership development.

¶7 In addition to the survey’s open-ended questions, both groups were asked to pick their top three leadership subjects from a list of eight.⁸ These eight were chosen from focus interviews with key librarians and AALL board members in the development of the first AALL Leadership Fellows curriculum and were the subjects covered in the “Take the Lead” seminar in the fall of 2008. Data were analyzed through both qualitative analysis and statistical sorting and rankings.

Leadership: Does Thinking Make It So?

¶8 The survey’s first question, “*Do librarians think of themselves as leaders?*” elicited the longest, most varied, and most emphatic responses. It was productive of rich data and also inspired some pushback about the wording of the question, especially from the Longtime Librarians who wanted to argue with the question and define their terms (e.g., “I can’t generalize.”).

¶9 Qualitative analysis of responses from both Longtime and Emergent Librarians suggested more agreement about what prevented leadership than what defined it. In both groups, there was a broad agreement about the top three elements that were deterrents to leadership: position, personality, and perception.

¶10 Both groups described the constraints of the position and role of the law librarian, conveying the sense that leadership was beyond the scope of a librarian’s duties. Consider three brief examples—all indicative of this view:

- “One reason may be where we are on the organizational charts: usually off to the side.”
- “In my library we have one specific job and we don’t cross over—we are at the bottom of the totem pole.”
- “It is a service industry, and only those in administration tend to think of themselves as leaders.”

For some respondents, service and leadership were seen as mutually exclusive, and descriptions of the positional limitations were often stated with strong affect. For example: “In general I do not think that librarians think of themselves as leaders. In

7. See DAVID L. COOPERRIDER & DIANA KAPLIN WHITNEY, *APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY* 8 (2005).

8. See *infra* ¶ 29.

part, I think this is due to the role librarians play in the larger organization and the ‘disincentives’ that actively discourage the leadership of library professionals.”

¶11 Many respondents described a typical librarian personality and temperament as being unsuitable for leadership. These statements ranged from the pithy: “We are just a bunch of old ladies resistant to change,” to a laundry list of traits that run counter to leadership behaviors. Among them were conflict avoidance, risk aversion, unwillingness to learn about office politics, dislike of the stress of making difficult decisions, and fear of failure when taking on a change initiative. Such descriptions were sometimes paired with the assumption that this “typical” personality of a librarian was linked with the choice to become a librarian. One respondent elaborated on this idea:

A very large group of librarians do not see themselves as leaders and do not want to be. They chose this profession because they had the stereotype of orderly retiring people, and that is what their personality craves. . . . They avoid conflict with a passion and have shy or retiring personalities. They do not want to stand out or be placed in a position of authority. Do not present them with a change that takes them outside of their comfort zone.

¶12 An academic Longtime Librarian cited both position and personality when she wrote: “The personality traits [such as] humility and being retiring make self-promotion and labeling yourself a leader as difficult.” Others profiled the personality traits. For example:

Librarians by nature are often reticent and shy. They are in a service profession and think of themselves as servants—not people who manage and lead organizations, services, and change. Most librarians self-selected this field because they are humble [and] not arrogant people. We value others and their contributions and respect what they do. Humble people do not think of themselves in leadership roles. Even those of us who lead organizations often don’t think of ourselves as leaders.

¶13 Emergent Librarians, describing a third deterrent to viewing oneself as a leader, were more likely than Longtime Librarians to emphasize a process of viewing themselves through the lens of others. One Emergent Librarian describes the effect of this audience: “I believe that the way other people view librarians can [cause] librarians to view themselves as followers rather than leaders. Often librarians are added to a committee as an afterthought. It requires additional effort on the part of librarians to let others know they can be leaders.”

¶14 One academic Emergent Librarian described the faculty/law librarian relationship dynamic as a lens that deterred identification with leadership:

We are held back by our feelings of inferiority; we deal primarily with law faculty who are aggressive and unafraid to tell everyone how great they are and how they went to Harvard or Yale and excelled in law school. . . . Law faculty are good at making reticent people feel inferior and all who are generally introverted to begin with, and who don’t tout their own horns, are great targets for faculty members’ not-always-intended putdowns.

¶15 It was striking to note that those who answered an unqualified “yes” to whether librarians consider themselves leaders, did so in few words and with more specifics. Some examples:

- (Emergent Librarian) “Yes, because it is a time of great change in libraries, and I think librarians feel that they are leading their customers through these changes.”

- (Longtime Librarian) “In general, we see ourselves as leaders. We teach, counsel, assist, guide, and suggest. We look for new methods and tools for our constituents and offer different approaches to problem solving.”

The capacity for proactive—as contrasted with reactive—behavior was a frequent point of comparison.

¶16 Both Longtime and Emergent Librarians tended to see their leadership as driven by technology and access. As one Longtime Librarian put it: “Copyright laws, public access to information, and intellectual freedom—this is how we got the moniker ‘radical militant librarians’ from the FBI.” Describing the role of technology in leadership an emergent librarian wrote:

Librarians increasingly think of [themselves] as leaders, Technology is developing at a rapid pace and law librarians have been leaders in learning these technologies. Teaching our patrons how to use them and keeping up to date with emerging resources, our patrons expect us to be experts in information retrieval and management; therefore they view us as leaders. I think it is a term we need to embrace and be comfortable with.

Taking the Lead

¶17 When Emergent Librarians were asked about situations that call for leadership, they repeatedly underlined their own responsibility for demonstrating their value. The strongest theme was the imperative to be proactive. As one librarian explained, it’s important “to avoid turning a law library into a computer with a kiosk.” From defending line items in a budget to devoted advocacy, Emergent Librarians were clear about the need to market their contributions. An Emergent Librarian detailed several scenarios:

- “A recruiter told the librarians that new attorneys should be given passwords to Lexis and Westlaw without training because they ‘have been using Google since they were born.’”
- “An attorney giving a tour to a recruit said that the library [budget] had been cut because ‘everything is online now.’”

Her conclusion was echoed by many others in the study: “Considering the current economic climate, libraries should be preparing evidence of their value to their firms.”

¶18 Others in the study demonstrated their value and saw the opportunity for leadership through educating users:

My role as a leader also emerges when I train new junior associates on our library materials and procedures. I am very grateful that I meet every new attorney who comes to work at the firm, because I, as a solo librarian in this office, am the face of the library services. I want them to know that I am a resource that they may use and not just someone who sits behind a desk checking out books. I introduce them to our collection, tell them about our various electronic databases, and let them know that I can assist with any research needs. I find that I am able to use my teaching/training skills when working with attorneys as well. This is, for me, the best part of being a leader.

¶19 One respondent captured the call for leadership in a writerly and succinct statement:

- “When someone needs to be objective (when there is conflict)
- When someone needs to be creative (when there is stagnancy)
- When someone needs to be persistent (when there is reluctance/fear).”

¶20 The theme of Emergent Librarians as change drivers was largely limited to change vis à vis technology. But one atypical and memorable respondent wrote a strong manifesto for himself and his colleagues:

[We need to be] taking the lead on large research assignments (read: those that would take one individual days/weeks to complete); questioning policies on practices that no longer seem valid, whether due to changes in structure, technology, economic growth, etc.; and making bold suggestions as to collection development strategies that may conflict with those pushed by more senior library managers or firm partners.

¶21 In a parallel question, Longtime Librarians were asked what they wished they had known about leadership and how to take the lead when they were starting out. The responses were wide ranging, with a large number mentioning a mix of political and people issues. Among them: playing politics, emotional intelligence, managing conflict, offering coaching, and choosing boundaries and battles. These were often phrased as advice. For example, “tackle personnel situations head on and early—don’t let any employee create a toxic work environment” and “work at understanding your strengths and those of others.” One respondent offered the wisdom of her experience:

How much of leadership is good old common sense. . . . If you are in tune with the priorities and interests of stakeholders and decision makers and keep your ears open, while developing a reputation as reliable and trustworthy through the quality of your work and your availability and accessibility, you’ll have the opportunity to take initiatives and step out as a leader. It’s not rocket science, it’s mostly emotional intelligence, and it has to come from a genuine interest in other people—their projects and priorities. You can’t fake caring about what you do and what goes on in your organization and profession. Keep it real.

¶22 A resonant and recurrent motif could be glimpsed in a number of Longtime Librarians—a sense that leadership is not bestowed at birth. They see it as a set of qualities learned and acquired over time. In the words of one: “I have had some good role models, but experience can be the best teacher. Some bosses were better than others, but all provide insights that you can use or not use. Becoming a leader might not be an overnight process. A good leader is also a good learner.”

Good Leaders/Good Learners

¶23 The question of what subject matter potential leaders ought to learn was a central focus of the survey. Comparative data from the Longtime Librarian and Emergent Librarian groups was sought in parallel questions. Longtime Librarians were asked to list subject areas that should be covered in a class for aspiring leaders. Emergent Librarians were asked to list subject areas that should be covered in a leadership curriculum designed for them and other colleagues new to the field.

¶24 The most striking aspects of both the Longtime Librarian and Emergent Librarian data were the number of subject areas listed. The Longtime Librarian cohort identified seventy-one distinct subject areas and the Emergent cohort identified one hundred. These subject areas were combined and graphed into the broader categories that appear in figure 2, which compares the percentages for the two categories of librarians. Even with this vast array of competencies, it is also significant to note how much agreement is found in the top four choices. Both groups chose management skills, public speaking, finance, and communication skills as four of their top five.

¶25 This data also suggests other instructive trends. In a question about subject areas needed for “leadership,” it is significant that in both groups the number one subject area was labeled as general “management behaviors” (forty-six percent for both Longtime Librarian and Emergent Librarian groups). In addition, those competencies widely considered to be in the domain of management competencies (e.g., finance) were also prominent in both group’s choices. This lack of a crisp distinction between management and leadership poses an educational challenge in leadership development efforts. It would appear that management techniques, which are considered a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for leadership⁹ might be best addressed in a separate curriculum.¹⁰

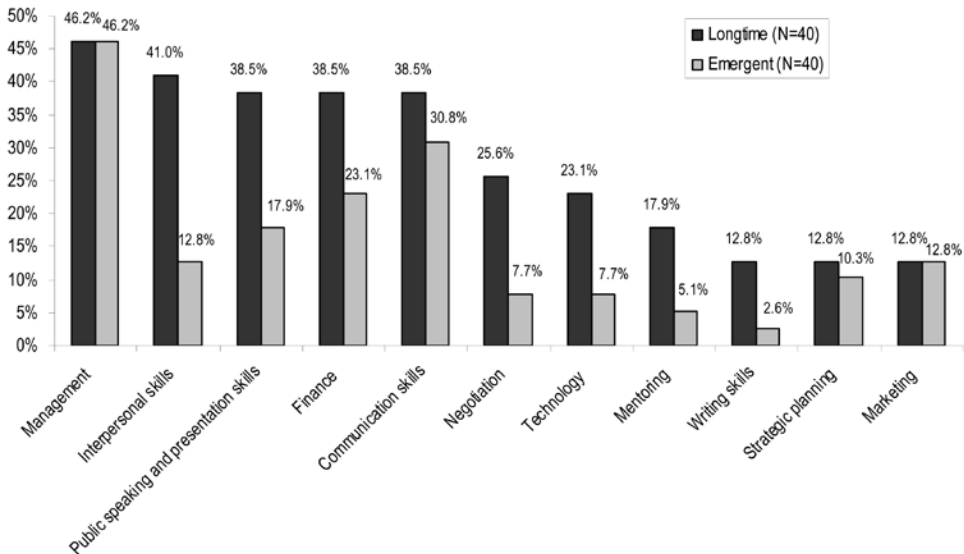


Figure 2. Comparison of Subject Areas Important to Longtime Librarians and Emergent Librarians for Developing Librarian Leadership

9. See WARREN BENNIS, *WHY LEADERS CAN'T LEAD* 79–80 (1989).

10. AALL does hold management institutes on a regular basis. See Am. Ass'n of Law Libraries, AALL 2009 Management Institute, http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/event_institute2009.asp (last visited Sept. 4, 2009).

¶26 Attention must also be paid to the primacy of specific areas of competence, in particular to public speaking and presentation skills and the broad category of communication skills, including negotiation. This suggests the need for a deliberate educational focus on these areas within the profession.

School for Leaders

¶27 Longtime and Emergent Librarians were asked to choose their top three among the eight leadership subjects/competencies as described below:

- Identify and capitalize on your unique strengths—while understanding how they may differ from others on your team.
- Frame productive questions—to understand your library’s culture, and stakeholders’ behavior or to identify priorities in your work.
- Draw upon your capacity for strategic “big picture” thinking and decision mapping.
- Increase your visibility—using meetings, speeches, and memos to communicate the value you bring to your organization.
- Apply coaching and communication tools to cope with varied personalities and bridge generations.
- Build your capacity for creativity, innovation, and fresh ideas.
- Translate your values and aspirations into a vision for your leadership and organization.
- Increase your mastery of change; cultivate optimistic thinking.

¶28 The responses of both groups are captured in figures 3 and 4. Emergent Librarians put the strongest emphasis on identifying and capitalizing upon their strengths, with the capacity to frame productive questions and big picture thinking close behind. For Longtime Librarians, the capacity to see the big picture was prominent, along with awareness of strengths and increased visibility.

What Do Library Leaders Really Want?

¶29 Longtime and Emergent Librarians were careful about what they wished for. In answering the survey’s final two questions, both groups revealed their values and aspirations for enhanced leadership in the future. Larger budgets, and professional and leadership education were mentioned frequently. But the universal theme for both cohorts was mentorship. An Emergent Librarian provided the job description: “Someone who I can talk to frankly, who can help me move forward.” A Longtime Librarian wrote, “early mentoring can give a framework, but cutting the cord at the right time will allow them to function independently and resourcefully.”

¶30 Longtime Librarians often detailed the importance of nurturing leadership by looking outside of one’s own library and into the larger profession and the business community. That said, a small number of Longtime Librarians expressed disappointment when characterizing the next generation of leaders. One Longtime

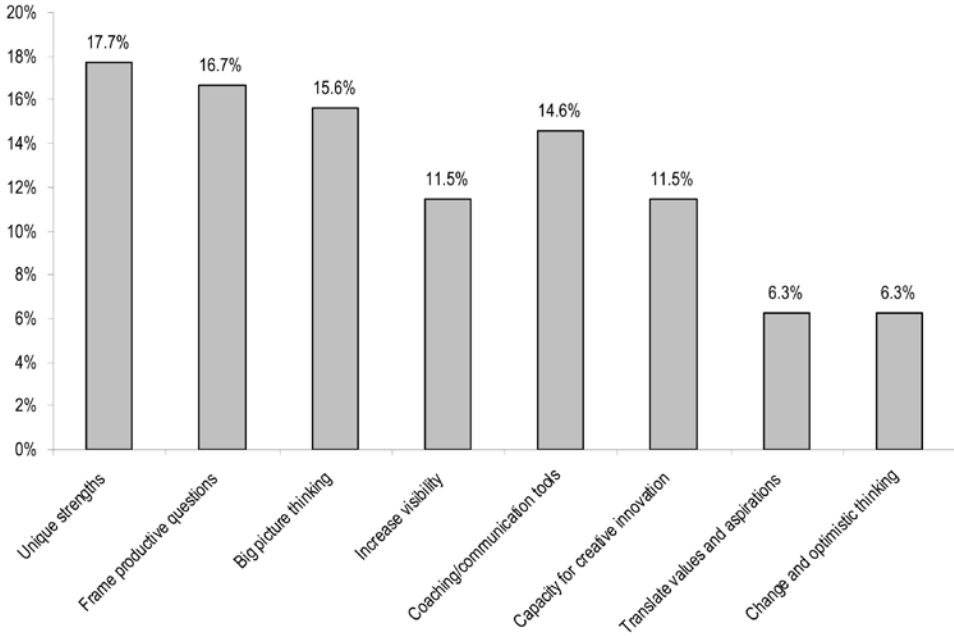


Figure 3. Items Selected as “Top Three” for Developing Librarian Leadership for Emergent Librarians (N=32, 96 votes)

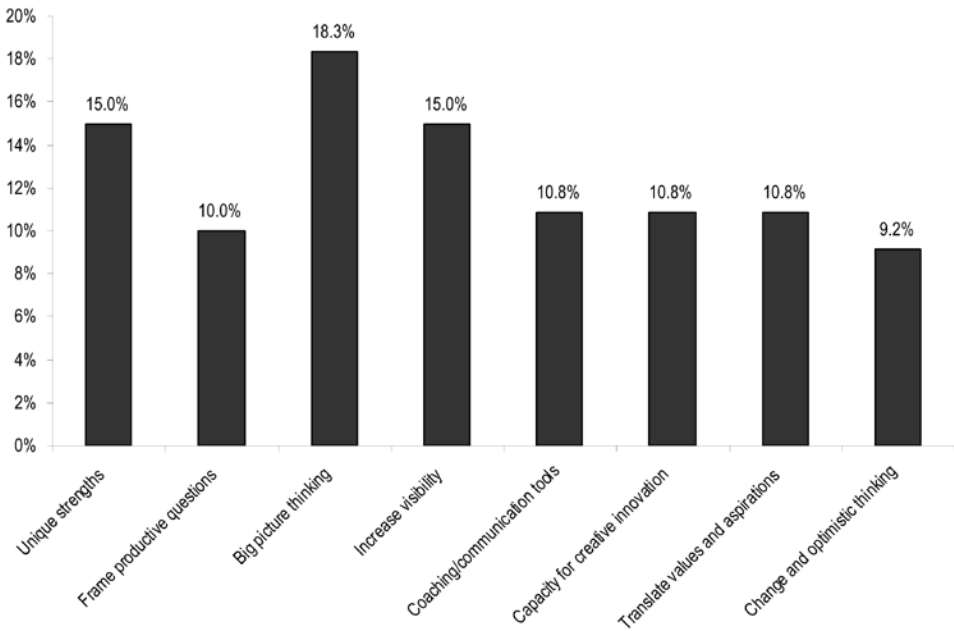


Figure 4. Items Selected as “Top Three” for Developing Librarian Leadership for Longtime Librarians (N=40, 120 votes)

Librarian scolded, “younger librarians assert themselves in ways that are repressive or counterproductive.”

¶31 Beyond these broad themes, the aspirations and future scenarios of the eighty librarians in the study were as individual as their signatures. Their responses are both instructive and inspiring. Consider the words of a seasoned librarian to the new generation, who wished them

. . . the realization that a lot of the knowledge can only be learned on the job and that a lot of leadership skills come from daily life and experience. [Some librarians want to move up the ladder before they are ready for the attendant challenges and responsibilities,] so develop patience and perseverance.

. . . the realization that with hard work, interest, and enthusiasm, the aspiring law librarian can be a leader in any position in the library, so foster the ability to be true to yourself.

Defining Leadership: Conclusions and Implications

¶32 This study, a close reading of the words of eighty law librarians, was driven by the goal of addressing the query at the top of the AALL agenda: What are the characteristics of an effective leader in our profession? Several trends seen in the survey results have implications that can be addressed in the future.

¶33 Analysis of the data highlighted two related and resonant trends in both the Emergent and Longtime Librarian groups. First, consider the sheer number and variety of definitions of leadership and its qualities and competencies (141 in all). This large number of definitions of leadership is linked to a clear overall pattern in both groups—the lack of distinction between the skills and actions of a manager as contrasted with those of a leader.

¶34 Second, the data analysis revealed less of a consensus about the nature of library leadership and more of an agreement on the deterrents to leadership. There were, however, three resonant ideas about leadership in law library: the presence of mentor, the ability to demonstrate the value and viability of the law library, and the related capacity to communicate and persuade through public speaking and presentations.

¶35 Such findings suggest actionable arenas that might shape AALL’s strategic commitment to leadership training and development. This will involve building a culture of leadership—one that imagines each person with opportunities to lead in his or her own way. One characteristic of this culture would be to nurture generativity—defined as taking interest, and finding satisfaction in, mentoring and developing the next generation of librarians.

¶36 For starters, remember that some of the strongest statements were about why librarians cannot—and do not—lead. This trifecta included personality traits (“retiring old ladies”), position in the hierarchy of the legal setting (“low on the totem pole”), and perceptions of others (“great targets for putdowns”). Dismantling these deterrents would be job one. The first step would be to sharpen the vocabulary of leadership talk and create a crisp distinction between the skills and behaviors of a manager and a leader. As a practical matter, this would involve educational planning and continuing education that differentiated management skills such as

budgeting, project, and personnel management from those of leadership (e.g., coaching/mentoring, and innovative or visionary thinking). In addition, both management and leadership training programs would include the mechanics of presentation of self and ideas in public speaking, at meetings, and in print.

¶37 Beyond the distinctions between managers and leaders, a next step might be to create a more user-friendly set of connotations of what it means to be a strong leader in the law library—one that would trump the position, personality, and perception roadblocks. The goal would be to weaken the resistance to the word “leader” and its larger-than-life connotation, and to suggest that each librarian has the potential to lead in a variety of ways.

¶38 These directions argue with the observation of one responding Star Trek fan who noted, “Not everyone can be Captain Kirk; some are Scotty.” Instead, they underline educator Howard Gardener’s inclusive definition of leadership, which seems a good fit for all law librarians: Leaders are “individuals who significantly influence the thoughts, behaviors, and/or feelings of others.”¹¹

¶39 Gardner’s definition suggests that leadership training for law librarians should build on a foundation of management skills and focus on a strengths-based approach. These strategies emphasize each person’s unique strengths and capacity to take the lead in her own way and to learn about, and demonstrate, her value to the organization.

¶40 The idea here is to suggest potential models and roles for law librarians to influence others as leaders (see table 1). These might include librarian as mission driver, librarian as initiator, librarian as stakeholder, librarian as teacher librarian as student, and librarian as change master.

¶41 The striving toward leadership is captured in the wisdom of a Emergent Librarian with two years’ experience, who imagines the circumstances that would allow him to take on a leadership role in the near future:

I would have been given the opportunity to lead and make the organization better than it was before. Rather than having the organizational philosophy that we should not rock the boat when things are going well, there would instead have to be a philosophy that no matter how good we are, we need to continuously improve what we do and how we do it. This would provide the opportunities to lead and accomplish great things, thereby allowing me to develop and exhibit my leadership skills.

As AALL continues to define the meaning and the teaching of leadership, these words can map the terrain.

11. HOWARD GARDNER, *LEADING MINDS* 6 (1995).

Table 1. Roles for Law Library Leaders

Role	Leadership Behaviors
<p>Librarian as Mission Driver</p> <p>“If you are in tune with the priorities and interests of stakeholders and decision makers, you’ll have the opportunity to take initiatives and step out as a leader. It’s not rocket science, it’s mostly emotional intelligence and it has to come from a genuine interest in other people—their projects and priorities. You can’t fake caring about what you do and what goes on in your organization and profession.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain line of sight to organizational and personal values/priorities • Connect with different personalities • Big picture thinking/identify priorities
<p>Librarian as Initiator</p> <p>“[We need to be] taking the lead on large research assignments; questioning policies on practices that no longer seem valid, whether due to changes in structure, technology, economic growth, etc.; making bold suggestions as to collection development strategies that may conflict with those pushed by more senior library managers or firm partners.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate evidence based data of value to organization • Increase visibility • Utilize presentation and public speaking skills
<p>Librarian as Student</p> <p>“The realization that a lot of the knowledge can only be learned on the job and that a lot of leadership skills come from daily life and experience.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and build on strengths • Identify and seeking guidance of mentors • Commitment to continuing education • Capacity to leverage lessons from experience
<p>Librarian as Teacher</p> <p>“I want them to know that I am a resource, not just someone who sits behind a desk checking out books. I introduce them to our collection, tell them about our various electronic databases, and let them know that I can assist with any research needs. I find that I am able to use my teaching and training skills when working with attorneys as well.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop capacity to mentor/coach • Display generativity and interest in next generation • Provide resource guidance • Translate technology
<p>Librarian as Change Master</p> <p>“Technology is developing at a rapid pace and law librarians have been leaders in learning these technologies. Teaching our patrons how to use them and keeping up to date with emerging resources, our patrons expect us to be experts in information retrieval and management; therefore they view us as leaders.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate learning agility • Communicate new ideas • Strengthen capacity for innovation

Appendix A

Instrument #1: Longtime Librarian Leadership Questionnaire (ten or more years in the field)

1. Do you believe that law librarians think of themselves as leaders? Why/why not?
2. List some qualities and competencies that you regard as central to becoming a leader in the field.
3. If you were planning a leadership program for aspiring leaders, what subject areas would you include in the course curriculum?
4. When you think about your own education as a leader, what do you wish you had known about leadership when you were starting out?
5. If you had three wishes for aspiring young law librarians—and each wish would help them build their leadership—what would you wish for them?
6. Imagine that it is the year 2012. Many new librarians today are in leadership roles in their settings. What would have happened to facilitate their growth as leaders?

Appendix B

Instrument #2: Emergent Librarian Leadership Questionnaire (five years or fewer in the field)

1. Do you believe that law librarians think of themselves as leaders? Why/why not?
2. Name several situations in your particular setting that call for leadership.
3. What qualities or competencies would you need to develop in order to take a leadership role in your setting?
4. If you were planning a leadership program for yourself and those new to the field, what subject areas would you include in the curriculum?
5. If you could be granted three wishes—and each would be a factor in building your leadership—what would they be?
6. Imagine it is the year 2012 and you are widely regarded as a leader in your setting and in AALL. What would have happened to facilitate your growth as a leader?