

Leadership Skills for the Law Library Manager

AALL Institute, July 17 & 18, 1997, Baltimore, Maryland

by Sheri Lewis

A deserted, pre-Annual Meeting Baltimore Convention Center was the scene for a two-day Institute on Leadership Skills for the Law Library Manager. With a background of AALL Executive Board members convening and AALL staff anxiously preparing for the arrival of several thousand Association members, 19 law librarians gathered for the Institute. While the participants came primarily from academic environments, law firm and court librarians also attended. They had come to assess their individual leadership skills and analyze and develop ways to be better managers at their institutions. Most found success.

Ground Rules

The two-day Institute was facilitated by Maureen Sullivan, a librarian and library consultant who is a frequent leader at seminars and workshops. She began the first morning by setting the ground rules for the next two days. These rules, or "norms for learning," were designed to ease the participants' comfort level by identifying differences in learning styles and expectations for group participation. We were each to contribute in whatever way was most appropriate for our individual learning styles. There should be no presumed pressure to participate in group discussion. There should be an expectation of sensitivity and patience for varying points of view. Differences in approach, opinion, and style were presumed for all Institute participants.

This introduction to learning set the stage for Sullivan's presentation for this Institute. Her approach was theoretical, with hints of practical application throughout. She identified various aspects of leadership styles and management approaches—sociological models that set the stage for discussion and group and individual exercises. Sullivan presented each topic with a model or models and a lecture presentation. The models, derived from experts in the field of management theory, were accompanied by a brief article or citations to further readings. The specific model or theory of management was then explored further through individual exercises, group discussion of the model, small group exercises, or some combination of the above.

Three Main Topics

The topics covered during this Institute can be categorized into three areas. The first morning was devoted to an exploration of the leadership model. Thursday afternoon and Friday morning focused on the various roles of a leader: as developer, communications facilitator, and decision maker. The final afternoon focused on two topics: building commitment in your institution and planning your personal development as a leader. Each topic was further subdivided into smaller ones. For instance, the "leader as developer" category included the topics of situational leadership, coaching, and empowerment.

Strong Points...

This Institute had many strengths. It was my sense that most of the attendees found it extremely useful. Perhaps the most effective part of the sessions was Sullivan's ability to incorporate lecture/discussion portions with individual and group exercises. She accomplished this in an extremely well-planned manner—for

example, handling the topic of "leader as communicator" progressively. First Sullivan presented a model illustrating the process of one-on-one or interpersonal communication. She then expanded the presentation and focused on various types of organizational communication. At this point, participants had an opportunity to explore various types of communication within their institutions (formal vs. informal, written vs. oral, internal vs. external) during group discussion centering upon personal experiences. Finally, participants paired off and engaged in exercises designed to analyze listening skills. Each of the other topics was presented in a similar manner, engaging the participants in various levels of group and individual interaction.

The Institute featured other extremely positive aspects. Sullivan's resource packet and handouts provided a wealth of reading materials on the theory of leadership. The exercises and skills assessment routines provided valuable material to take back to attendees' institutions for individual and group assessment. Her knowledge of the subject matter was apparent, as was her sensitivity to the limitations of group learning within a two-day program.

...and Shortcomings

Despite the many positive aspects of this Institute, there were two notable shortcomings. One disappointment was the failure to consistently and specifically address leadership and management skills in the law library setting. To the extent that such specific issues were raised, they were from personal experiences shared with the group and not as a deliberate part of the curriculum. Additionally, Sullivan's emphasis on theory and models of leadership and management became tedious at times and seemed to beg for more practical application than was offered during the sessions.

This type of Institute or workshop should be an ongoing offering as part of AALL's professional development efforts. However, it is likely to be more successful with a greater emphasis on the more practical and day-to-day management of law libraries.

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