Amy Tureen, Erick Lemon, Joyce Martin, Starr Hoffman, Mindy Thuna, and Willie Miller

Virtual cohorts

Peer support and problem-solving at a distance

A common challenge for administrative leaders in academic libraries is that we often have few peers within our organizations, and those that we do have may not be able to provide the dispassionate, unbiased feedback we need. The authors of this article, library leaders from across the United States and Canada, formed a virtual cohort for peer leader support and have found it to be transformative in approaching leadership challenges at our home institutions.

Our group met at the Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians (LIAL) in summer 2018. The LIAL program uses small group activities to help participants solve significant challenges using the four frames of higher education leadership identified in Lee G. Bolman and Joan V. Gallos's *Reframing Academic Leadership*.[1] Following the program, our group formed virtually, through video calls, with the goal of continuing the process of sharing case studies for feedback. In this article, we share our experience so that other library leaders may form their own virtual peer groups.

A model for long-distance support and collaboration

To meet our groups' objectives we met five times, roughly every six weeks, from November 2018 to May 2019. Prior to each meeting, group members wrote a case study about an issue or problem they were having at work. Case studies were usually one-to-two pages and focused primarily on middle management issues, such as personnel, organization-al change, reorganization, strategic planning, space renovation, and project management. Cases were emailed to the group and read prior to the meeting. In addition to reading other members' case studies through the lens of our own experience, we also incorporated the knowledge of the four frames of leadership we learned while at LIAL to help us comment and aid our colleagues.

The four frames of leadership include the *structural* frame, which emphasizes formal roles, relationships, and hierarchies; the *political* frame, which focuses on power and resource allocation; the *human resource* frame, which focuses on people and their satisfaction, motivation, etc.; and the *symbolic* frame, which builds shared meaning, rituals, values, and vision.[2] Each member of the cohort had a particular strength in one

Amy Tureen is head of the Library Liaison Program at the University of Nevada Las Vegas University Libraries, email: amy.tureen@unlv.edu, Erick Lemon is director of Digital Strategies and Innovation at the Medical University of South Carolina Libraries, email: lemone@musc.edu, Joyce Martin is social science division head at the Arizona State University Library, email: joyce.martin@asu.edu, Starr Hoffman is director of planning and assessment at the University of Nevada Las Vegas University Libraries, email: starr.hoffman@unlv.edu, Mindy Thuna is interim associate chief librarian for science and research information and head of the Engineering and Computer Science Library at the University of Toronto Libraries, email: mindy.thuna@utoronto.ca, and Willie Miller is associate dean for communication and technology at IUPUI University Library, email: wmmiller@iupui.edu

or two of these leadership frames, but none of the cohort members were experts in all four frames. Looking at an issue through a nondominant frame often provided additional potential solutions or positive ways forward that we might not have thought of on our own, leading to an enhanced appreciation of different perspectives.

During our meetings each group member would briefly present a summary of their case study and then open the floor for discussion. A moderator ensured all who wanted to participate in the discussion could do so. Our group members wrote and discussed approximately 30 case studies, allowing us to gain a stronger understanding of the four frames of leadership, get a chance to know each other better professionally and personally, and benefit from each other's professional experience.

Challenges, barriers, and virtual cohorts

By far the most challenging aspect of both managing and participating in the cohort was time. Identifying an available time quickly became a process of schedule-by-winnowing as facilitated by the free Doodle polling product. Using a custom Doodle poll, users indicated which date and time blocks matched their availability. A single group member was then tasked with identifying the meeting time most suitable to the majority of the cohort and sending calendar invitations.

Time limitations also proved challenging for individual cohort members in advance of each virtual meetup. In addition to carving out time for the meeting itself, all six participants had to dedicate time to both writing their own case study and reading the case studies of others. Anecdotal evidence indicated that while increased confidence in both writing case studies and applying the frames led, generally, to shorter writing periods, early case study writing periods took a significant and unexpected amount of time to complete. Individuals starting a cohort that includes a prewriting component would do well to be as honest and transparent as possible about the likely time commitment.

During our one-year process review, these time concerns resulted in some significant changes to the meeting structure and schedule for 2019-20. Meetings were reduced from 90 minutes to 60 minutes, and the group transitioned to a standing monthly meeting. The same review determined that requiring all members to submit a case a week in advance sometimes caused frustration as members might not have a pressing issue to present, their pressing issue might have been resolved in the week between submitting their case and the group meeting, or a more pressing issue not captured in a case study might arise during the same interim week. To address these issues, our group shifted to a model where only one-to-two case studies were presented each week, and more space was made available for members to discuss issues that had recently arisen.

Successes and reflections

The cohort members took a pre- and post-year survey to determine our goals for the group and judge our achievement of them. The two goals most commonly selected as the top two priorities were "enhance relationships with my colleagues in the LIAL program to broaden my peer network" and "broaden my knowledge of common leadership experiences and problems and how to approach them."[3] After the first year of the cohort, three participants indicated that these goals were fully realized, and three indicated that they were mostly realized. There is further evidence of fulfilling the peer relationships goal, as nearly all participants reported increasing their familiarity with nearly all other participants by at least a factor of one, and that at the conclusion of the study there was at least one other participant who they did not know previously but to whom they would now reach out to with a problem or concern. Participants indicated that this process was most successful at achieving the objectives of "exploring different types of problem-solving choices" and "identifying partners for future scholarship projects." The data also shows that all participants increased

their comfort level using at least one of the leadership frames, and most participants (60%) increased their skills in at least two frames.

Qualitative data in the form of individual personal reflections also indicated participants regarded their time within the cohort as both beneficial and valuable. Each member of the cohort provided a summary statement of their experiences:

This experience has been so valuable as a sounding board that provides multiple perspectives and potential solutions, as well as validation that leadership is tough! It's helpful to reach out to people at similar levels with similar problems, but at different institutions--it's not only validating, but I feel I can speak more freely about my situation than I can with others at my own institution.

I am now a true believer in the value of virtual cohorts! Not only did participating in the cohort help me establish a collection of trusted colleagues, friends, and "sounding boards," it also provided me with far more opportunities to use both the four frames and the case study model than I suspect I otherwise would have. Now when I'm facing a thorny situation, I automatically begin to write a case study about it for my own review. The process helps me ensure I am reacting to what the situation is, rather than what the situation feels like to me given my own biases of perspective and dominant frames.

The knowledge that there are people who will listen and offer sound advice but are removed from the day-to-day environment has been invaluable. It also makes management a little less lonely because there are a group of like-minded people to commiser-

ate with me and offer advice (or just listen—always a wonderful thing).

Hearing fresh perspectives from amazing professionals has been so valuable to me, and I feel honored to be included in this group. Our virtual cohort has been an important source of professional support for me this year, and our case study model has helped me internalize the four frames of leadership as a method of problem-solving.

Using virtual cohorts has been a valuable method of self-reflection. The objective opinions and feedback offered allow participants' constructive evaluation from other leaders with invaluable perspectives. This offering of solutions from individuals versed in the four frames has helped me to consider solutions I may have not considered with my leadership style. This has also helped me to consider new solutions when approaching new challenges that arise.

The virtual cohort has given me the space to ask questions that I would feel uncomfortable asking in my organization. Even though I work in a very supportive library, I appreciate the ability to be vulnerable with colleagues that I do not work with every day.

Tips for developing a virtual cohort

When developing a virtual cohort, there are four broad categories of consideration: cohort membership, intent of cohort, meeting structure, and technology.

Cohort membership
Most cohorts can be managed by a single

organizer, although a co-organizer becomes invaluable in times of illness or extended absence. The most effective virtual cohort groups are small, between five-and-eight people. It is beneficial to ensure that group members share a similar experience (such as attending the same themed conference or training), have a similar scope of responsibility (such as "supervisors" or "department heads"), or hold a common professional role (such as professional in an academic library). Shared values or broadly defined common experiences help discussions remain relevant and helpful. If you are organizing your cohort around a multipronged competency, such as Bolman and Galloss frames, you might wish to ensure your group membership is balanced. Do this by selecting members who do not have all of the same strengths and weaknesses to avoid both an echo chamber effect and to ensure that all members can coach and be coached by other members.

Intent of cohort

Establishing a mutually agreed upon intention for the cohort is vital to avoid focus drift, particularly over long periods of time. Consider grounding sessions in a common theory, philosophical approach, or other shared readings. If you have several goals, it might be helpful to prioritize which goals matter the most.

Meeting structure

Meeting structures can vary widely, and the structure should be reviewed regularly. When deciding your meeting structure, consider which matters more: depth of discussion or speaking time equity. If prioritizing depth of discussion, you may wish to consider reducing the number of presenters or discussion leaders per session. When prioritizing speaking time equity, it is recommended that you establish a designated amount of time for each member to speak and make use of a timer to ensure time quotas are met. Both prioritization schemes benefit significantly from scheduling all meetings, discussion due dates, and order of speakers well in advance.

Technology

Advances in technology have made establishing and maintaining a virtual cohort very easy, largely due to the wide variety of platform agnostic no-cost video chat options available, such as Google Hangouts, Skype, ooVoo, Viber, and Facebook. The increasing number of higher education institutions adopting campus licenses of video chat software further expands the options for virtual cohorts, as most enterprise-level video chat products (such as AdobeConnect, Zoom, or WebEx) require only the host to hold a current license.

Conclusion

As our reflections indicate, this group found value in the virtual cohort both for gaining multiple perspectives on issues, and for a safe, confidential space outside our own organizations. This was a particularly helpful experience for growing relationships formed during LIAL, practicing the case study method, and gaining more experience using the leadership frames. All six authors strongly advocate for the development and proliferation of virtual cohorts for leaders as an opportunity to grow and develop within the confines of a supportive and informed peer group. We further recommend the use of virtual cohorts as a way to extend the impact of transformational training and development opportunities.

Notes

1. Lee G. Bolman and Joan V. Gallos, *Reframing Academic Leadership, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

2. Ibid.

3. Amy E. Tureen, Erick Lemon, Joyce Martin, Starr Hoffman, Mindy Thuna, and Willie Miller, Virtual Cohorts as a Team Building and Problem-Solving Tool (poster), Scholarship@UNLV, https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/libfacpresentation/187/ (accessed October 1, 2019). ✄