Carissa Tomlinson and Danya Leebaw

Reflections

Middle management during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has uprooted all of our lives in varied and numerous ways. In academic libraries, we are living in ambiguity and uncertainty, while trying to plan for what seems like an ever changing "pivot" as our institutions' plans fluctuate by the day. Library staff at all levels must engage in continuous scenario planning, both in their jobs and in their personal lives. We wonder, when will our campuses reopen, or if they are open, we wonder if they will shut back down. We try to weigh the importance of our services with the risks to our staff and our patrons.

Perhaps hardest of all, we often lack control over the decisions that are made at a campus level that directly affect us. While senior administrators work to make sense of campus priorities and mandates, librarians and other library staff navigate how to do their jobs, often with different responsibilities in a new environment and many while juggling children, illness, and/or anxiety.

Middle managers in libraries are in a unique and challenging position, supporting all of these contingencies, while serving as an intermediary between administrative decision making and their direct reports' on-the-ground experience and expertise. Due to their role, middle managers have valuable perspective and particular influence throughout the organizational hierarchy. During a pandemic, the simultaneously rewarding and exhausting nature of middle management is only heightened.

In this article we will talk about the authors' experiences as middle managers at the University of Minnesota Libraries during the time of COVID-19, as well as what we have heard from several of our colleagues in similar roles at smaller academic institutions. While middle management represents just one slice of the academic library workforce, we suspect our particular experiences can help illuminate the significant challenges and decisions libraries faced during this time.

We hope our nearly real-time reflections offer some validation for other middle managers and provide transparency for senior administrators. In turn, perhaps some of these insights will help those of us in leadership create as supportive and stable a workplace for nonmanagerial library workers as possible.

Shutting down

A major role of a middle manager is to be a communication bridge between those doing the day-to-day work and those making organizational decisions. We work to make this conduit smooth and nearly invisible by managing up and down with finesse. We bring information, perspec-

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Carissa Tomlinson is director of Physical Sciences and Engineering, email: toml0035@umn.edu, and Danya Leebaw is director of Social Sciences and Professional Programs, email: leeba005@umn.edu, at the University of Minnesota Libraries

tive, and expertise together to reinforce priorities and decision making. Our vantage point is unique, as we have a hand in both day-to-day work and administration, yet often do not feel grounded in either. Even during normal times this ambiguous role can be complex and sometimes difficult, but during the pandemic, the drastic fluctuation in circumstance and plans happening across all areas of our work makes our position even more complex.

The rapid, unexpected shutdown and the ongoing disruption caused by the pandemic immediately called into question our routine communication patterns. With staff scattered to their homes so suddenly, as middle managers we felt as if we were the hubs in the wheels keeping staff connected to the organization and to one another.

As supervisors, we needed to get a handle on each direct report's personal situation and what their urgent needs were. Middle managers in our organization were the ones who reached out to learn of each person's childcare obligations and reallocate workloads or run interventions for those who were suddenly overwhelmed at home and unable to respond to user requests in a timely manner.

Many middle managers in our organization set up daily or biweekly Zoom meetings, often explicitly intended to be social and informal rather than focused on routine work. We emailed our staff more frequently, often daily, to communicate updates or just share that we did not have new information but would share as soon as we did.

In addition to needing to communicate much more frequently than usual with our own staff, our time spent in leadership-level discussions and administrative tasks also dramatically increased. Our middle and senior management cohorts, who had previously met weekly and monthly, respectively, began meeting almost daily. Middle managers were also flooded with human resource questions and had to quickly determine how to handle a range of complicated, varied issues for our direct reports.

Keeping track of policy updates and changes, and communicating these to our staff, became an urgent and demanding task for middle managers.

One new challenge for middle managers has been staying on top of each staff person's heterogeneous personal circumstances in order to adapt or reallocate workloads. Previously, we could presume everyone had capacity to work prearranged schedules and handle assigned workloads, and if not, we usually had time to plan accommodations. Now, within our teams, we have staff who have lacked childcare this entire time, are caring for elderly parents, or are in high-risk categories themselves.

Middle managers have also needed to address disparities in how and whether our staff's home environments are set up for work. Some staff lack Internet access, an adequate computer, a quiet place to work, or even appropriate temperature control to sustain long-term work-from-home conditions. As middle managers, we have needed to be more flexible than ever, while supporting staff in their stressful circumstances. We not only have had to manage our own expectations, we also regularly found ourselves needing to mediate tensions among staff who chafed at one another's ways of coping with stress, children, illness, and anxiety.

One middle management colleague has found that being honest about his own limitations has allowed him to model this sort of patience for his staff. He advises middle managers to "tell your direct reports when you cannot meet a deadline or if you are under pressure which may delay your responsibility to deliver something to them. If you show them that you are able to adjust deadlines and work, they will feel empowered to do the same."

Opening back up?

Now that we are several months into the

pandemic, our communication responsibilities have shifted from policies and adaptations for working from home toward decisions regarding the ongoing status of the library, our buildings, and our work. In a short time, we have moved from acclimating our staff to the challenges in the work-from-home environment to coming back onsite and facing real safety concerns. This quick shift has been a sort of whiplash for all of us. Back in March, we told our staff that for our safety and the safety of our students, we had to move online and work from home. Now, at a time when there are actually many more cases of COVID-19 locally, we are telling our staff that we have to open our doors and somewhat go back to normal.

Being forced to move forward when things feel unsafe, paired with the constantly changing directives from the larger institution, is stressful and confusing for all staff.

As a manager, we also face pushback or blame from our staff for things that are out of our hands. A colleague we talked to described the situation as feeling like "we're building the plane as we fly it."

She went on to describe her staff's frustrations and the pressure on her as a middle manager. "So often when staff ask good, tough questions I don't have an answer, and that's frustrating for me and for them. Each staff member is disappointed and frustrated that they don't get a satisfactory answer to their questions--but as a middle manager who is responding to lots of those questions from each staff member, the toll can feel exhausting."

As fraught as the reopening process has been, our role as middle managers has afforded us the feeling of having some control in this very messy time. Even if we do not fully agree with the decisions that are made, we are often privy to the conversations where these are discussed and initially presented. We usually have the opportunity to bring our staff's perspectives, as well as our own, to the table. Even if

the ultimate decisions are often made over our heads, we find some comfort in being able to advocate for our staff.

While we sometimes must keep confidential some of the concerns or reasoning we hear at senior-level meetings, we try to be transparent with staff so they are aware of managerial reasoning in making requests and decisions for the organization.

Invisible work and self-care

In the middle manager roles discussed—communicator, facilitator, advocate, decision maker—we often try to do our work as seamlessly, even as invisibly, as possible. Because so much of our job is to be there for our staff while also implementing administrative priorities, it is easy for middle managers to neglect their own priorities and needs. During the pandemic, our constituents all require more attention, leaving even less time and energy for ourselves.

But middle managers are people, too. We struggle with many of the same challenges as everyone else. Many of us are negotiating childcare issues, facing economic worry, caring for sick loved ones, or coping with a general anxiety about the state of the world. Like our staff, we could go to our own supervisors with these issues. But, since our work is centered on leading and supporting other people, many of us can feel like we have to keep these issues to ourselves.

Also, however untrue it may be, it can feel like a strong leader should not need to lean on those above us, even in a pandemic. For this reason, we have been glad to rely on a circle of colleagues and friends in similar middle management roles with whom we can express anxieties and frustrations. This peer network, however, is not readily available to all middle managers, especially in small institutions.

What now, and what's next?

At the time of writing, our libraries are open limited hours and limited locations, but it is possible this could change based on infection rates and larger university plans. We

will likely live with this uncertainty for some time. While this time has been extremely difficult, we have also learned lessons that we will take forward, even post-pandemic.

As we peer into their living rooms via Zoom, we are reminded of one another's whole humanity. We have met each others' children and pets. We have built an intimacy and trust that typically does not exist in the office. Through this lens, we have also witnessed incredible tenacity, self-motivation, and self-accountability. We also believe that our relationships with senior administrators have grown and strengthened. We have newfound respect for the hard decisions that senior administrators face and the work they do within often limited or ambiguous parameters that the university puts forward.

Finally, despite how middle management can feel like a thankless and invisible position, this crisis has affirmed the vital role middle managers play in sustaining organizational communications and supporting both our staff and library leadership. Perhaps for middle managers, a central task in the difficult times ahead will be doubling down on self-care and peer support, so we can continue showing up with the tremendous flexibility and resiliency required of us at this time.

Overall, these takeaways—about our staff, our leaders, and ourselves—will no doubt influence how we shape our work well into the future. At the least, we will likely approach our work with greater generosity for one another as colleagues, even when circumstances return to something more like what we had before COVID-19. In the meantime, while these challenging times persist with no sign of abating soon, we will lean into what we have already learned in order to continue showing up for one another. ✌

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