

Tahirah Akbar-Williams

In order to lead, you have to know what direction you are going

Cultivating well-rounded leaders is staking a claim on our future

My selection as an ALA Emerging Leader (EL) for 2012 has been an enriching experience.¹ The EL program is a leadership and development program for those who are relatively new to the library field. Selectees work together in groups to create projects, learn more about ALA, and are exposed to leadership and networking opportunities.

The ELs were divided into teams; I worked in Team B with four other ELs. Our group created three videos to help new conference attendees and ACRL members get the most out of their conference experience.² We were sponsored by ACRL's Membership Coordinating Committee and were given assistance and support by our member guide and staff liaison.

This program taught me the importance of having a vision of where you want to take your career. This idea of vision and direction made me recall an urban myth I heard in a leadership presentation.

The story goes, one day Albert Einstein was taking a train trip, and the conductor started to make his rounds and ask for tickets. He approached Einstein and asked for his ticket, but Einstein could not find it. The conductor, embarrassed because he realized to whom he was speaking, piped up, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are, no need to show me your ticket." However, Einstein insisted on looking for it, continu-

ing to check his pockets and belongings. The conductor again said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are, and I do not need to see your ticket, sir." Einstein looked back at him and said, "Young sir, I know who I am, but I need to know where I am going."

This story taught me that sometimes the smartest and most innovative people can lose sight of the direction in which they are headed. Many bright and innovative early career academic librarians are looking for guidance in developing their leadership skills, and often fail to realize they are their own biggest assets.

The way is through you

My EL experience showed me that early-career librarians have a wealth of career and leadership development opportunities around them for growth. We had great discussions and lectures and were given insightful readings about leadership and teamwork. This experience helped me understand that in order to continue to grow, I needed to nurture my leadership potential. I started by taking an inventory of the things I think I do well and those I could improve upon.

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I used a book titled *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath to help me with this process.³ This book helps you identify your strengths and learn how to improve on what you do well. For instance, do you have a gift for being a good communicator or do you have an analytical mind? If so, are you maximizing those strengths to benefit your work? If not, this book offers great suggestions to help you learn how to improve and build upon those strengths.

Another resource that helped help me with this process was “Leadership: Is Everybody’s Business,” an article by Laurel Goulet, Jonathan Jefferson, and Paul Szwed. The authors introduced the LEAD framework as a way for organizations to develop leaders. Like LEAD, my EL experience taught me that being a leader is more than possessing a title; it’s about having a set of skills and talents that can be cultivated.

LEAD—“Learn from theory, Experience through practice, Analyze using reflection, and Deepen understand through mentoring”⁴—is intended for an organization’s leadership development program, although I believe that using elements of it as a way to develop yourself is a worthwhile start. I like this framework and have adopted aspects of it for my own development. This is a rich article that’s full of practical information and knowledge to help you reach your highest potential.

Emerging in a new direction

My EL experience was the catalyst to understanding that developing leaders is a process. Attending leadership training helps early career librarians chart a course for success in this new frontier of librarianship. These readings helped me understand where I could continue to invest in what I saw as my leadership potential, and provided me with activities that I could adopt in order to do so. I see now that the work of cultivating future leaders is a two-pronged approach; it’s up to our library leadership and future leaders.

On the one hand, 21st-century libraries must continue to create and promote sophisticated plans to develop the leaders who can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing field. On the other hand, I learned through my EL experiences to take responsibility for readying myself for the direction of my professional development.

When leadership is cultivated to have the talents and skills to ensure our field has what it needs to soar, we stake our claim toward the future success of libraries.

Notes

1. ALA, “ALA Emerging Leader Program,” September 9th, 2012, www.ala.org/educationcareers/leadership/emerging-leaders.

2. The team created videos—“Navigating the American Library Association (ALA) Exhibit Hall,” “Get Connected @ Conference: Networking at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference,” and “Stay Connected at Conferences by Using Your Ears, Eyes and Feet!”—are available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQiWhsnlqPs&playnext=1&list=PLB017D3C79B088D2D&feature=results_main.

3. Tom Rath, *Strengths Finder 2.0* (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2008).

4. Laurel Goulet, Jonathan Jefferson, and Paul Szwed, “LEADERSHIP is Everybody’s Business,” *T+D* (8, 2012). *zz*

2012 Emerging Leaders Team B

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Marcella McGowan
Brook Minner
Heidi Steiner
Greta Wood

Member Guide: Allie Flannery
Staff Liaison: Mary Jane Petrowski