

Valeda F. Dent

## On leadership

How what you *don't* know can help you

**O**ne very important aspect of leadership is the ability to listen and learn from people and situations that are very different from what you typically experience on a daily basis, experiences that may be outside of your comfort zone. It is not something that those in leadership roles all get to experience, however. Folks in leadership positions will often tell you the assumption is that they *already know* what needs to be done, what the answers are, and how to handle whatever comes their way. I actually think those who are working to become more mindful leaders can learn the most by being exposed to new situations and to what they don't know.

Eight years ago, I traveled with a colleague to a remote village in Uganda to investigate a tiny, one-room library that had been built by an English professor from Hunter College, who was also a part-time resident of the village. We stayed for a summer, exploring the impact of the Kitengesa Community Library on various user groups—students, young children, those not able to read, the newly literate, women, farmers, and teachers. We visited villagers in their homes, ran focus groups, conducted ethnographic interviews, and spent hours doing in vivo observations. Because we were novices and knew nothing about the culture, the socioeconomic framework, the people, or the language, we listened, a lot. And we took notes and tried to record everything.

Through translators and using our broken Luganda and some English, we began to learn and understand more and more about

what the small rural community thought was important, in terms of their new library. The library was a strange, new, intriguing thing for this remote village. In a village with no running water and no electricity, the library was a real novelty. As researchers, we dispatched with our Western notions of what a library should be and do, and discovered a whole new way of thinking about library services, literacy, books, and human interaction. It changed both of our lives in ways that still cannot be explained.

Eight years on, the study of the rural village library phenomenon has expanded to include countries in West Africa and in the Southern part of the continent. It has become my passion. Last May, I completed my dissertation on the subject. There have been many articles, presentations, and, later this year, a book. I have recruited my husband—a clinical psychologist—to lend his expertise to the research project, and he in turn has recruited a few of his doctoral students who now travel with us to Uganda each year. Most recently, we have been working with the youngest library users—children ages 3 to 5—to find out how the library can best help prepare them for starting school. We have amassed a substantial dataset that we hope to be able to share with other interested scholars one day.

The Kitengesa Community Library is more important to the community than any

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library I had ever visited. The library now has a collection of more than 3,000 books, many of them in the native language. Young children and adults alike participate in literacy services and learn to read and write. The Womens' Self Help Group (which started as a library literacy group) works together as a collective and uses literacy and reading to address problems related to poverty in the village. Young adults use the library's resources to get their homework done and to study by solar-powered light. The library generates its own income in part by supporting a tree-planting project and by charging cell phones with solar-powered batteries. Other village libraries all over Africa now use the Kitengesa Community Library as a model. It is no longer just about books, it is about building community, sharing knowledge, and galvanizing local, small-scale economic development.

Thing is, given all of what I *do* know, I still know very little in the grand scheme of things. And every time I return, I learn more about how much I still don't know. But that is the best thing about it. And that's the thing that helps me improve certain leadership qualities—being open-minded, being patient, having the ability to tolerate the unknown, and understanding that no matter who folks are or where they come from, they probably have something very valuable to teach me.

I remember our very first door-to-door user surveys about what library materials the villagers wanted to see in the library. How could we have known that users would want books about how to start a fish farm? In a village where people live without electricity or running water, we needed to understand that library use was impacted by farming practices, the rising and setting of the sun, and the rainy season. It put a whole new spin on creating a better user experience for the community. It was the ultimate exercise in responsive, user-centered design.

Godwin Igein's model for leadership in developing countries focuses on the need to integrate cultural, religious, and ethnic norms into decision-making and into discussions about policy, strategy, and development.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, my work in Africa has helped me to dispatch with my very Westernized thinking and to in-

stead assume that there are solutions and ideas that exist outside of my awareness that may be very helpful. It has also helped me to better understand the value of connecting directly with library users—more so than keeping on top of the latest literature, research, or technological advances. The experience has taught everyone involved how much we do not know about the world, despite all the schooling and degrees.

Finally, it has taught me that one of the most important things a leader can be is a learner.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. G. Igein, "Godwin's leadership model for developing countries: Volunteer mentorship perspective," *Journal of Management and International Development* 12(3).

2. To learn more about the Kitengesa Community Library visit [www.kitengesaLibrary.org](http://www.kitengesaLibrary.org) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitengesa\\_Community\\_Library](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitengesa_Community_Library). To learn more about Friends for African Village Libraries visit [www.favl.org](http://www.favl.org). To view a short video on the most recent research in Kitengesa, visit <http://vimeo.com/37483491>. *W*

### ACRL/LLAMA Presidents' Program leadership moments contest

Join ACRL and LLAMA for their joint Presidents' Program at the 2013 ALA Annual Conference. Titled "Standing on Marbles: Ensuring Steady Leadership in Unsteady Times," the program will feature noted author, executive coach, and leadership consultant Karol M. Wasylyshyn.

In conjunction with the program, the ACRL/LLAMA Joint President's Program Committee is excited to offer all ALA members the opportunity to reflect on memorable moments of leadership that have inspired insights into their own leadership or potential. The committee wants to hear about these "leadership moments" by way of a written reflection competition. Full details are available at [www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/6723](http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/6723). The entry deadline is May 1, 2013.