Case studies

A perspective on academic library middle management in the COVID era

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A B S T R A C T

Middle managers in academic libraries are often the first point of contact for employees within their departments. Middle managers work as colleagues, advocates, and project managers. While the responsibilities may vary between institutions, it is essential that middle managers develop leadership skills to function effectively in their positions. In the era of COVID-19, middle managers must reconcile their own expectations of their role with the changing needs and responsibilities of those they manage. COVID-19 is a complex phenomenon that has brought many issues such as health and social inequity to the forefront. These issues should be considered in leadership techniques that are utilized by middle managers in academic libraries. When leading a department, the manager must consider the whole person. This column will discuss several leadership styles that consider the whole person and can be effective for academic library middle managers as they navigate the complexities of their positions in the COVID-19 Era.

Introduction

Middle managers in any organization have a unique role. They are advocates for their departments and champions for upper-level administration's initiatives. When employees have concerns about the workplace and also personal issues, the middle manager is the go-to person. Collins Dictionary defines middle managers as those "who are below the top level of management, and who are responsible for controlling and running an organization rather than making decisions about how it operates" (Collins, 2022). This definition highlights key aspects of middle management that considers both challenges and opportunities for managers to make a lasting impact in a department. In many academic libraries, department heads have the role of middle manager. I recognize that academic libraries vary in size and student population. I am employed at a mid-size university with three campuses. We have two libraries with several departments where department heads are the middle managers. In this paper, I will be addressing management challenges and solutions for department heads in this type of setting.

At our institution, department heads take care of the day-to-day operations to make sure that library users are served appropriately. For department heads, these duties include managing library instruction programs and research services, operating circulation services efficiently, and ensuring the speedy processing of print and electronic materials among other responsibilities. It is imperative that department heads develop leadership skills necessary to train, support and motivate their department, ensuring continuity of services and fulfillment of the

libraries' and University's mission. Leading from the middle is a tough job every day. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges for those of us in department head positions. Our library, like many others, immediately began planning the transition of our services to a virtual platform. The key players in developing this plan were the department heads (middle managers) along with the Dean and Associate Dean of Libraries. It was a unique situation because we had no written plan to guide our decisions about how to sustain library services during a health and social crisis. We developed a plan as we were all wondering how our lives would be changed by a deadly virus. One thing that became clear to me is how my leadership style can impact employees for better or worse. In the era of COVID-19, middle managers must reconcile their own expectations of their role with the changing needs and responsibilities of those they manage and develop a leadership style that will help motivate their employees (in my case, faculty librarians) to navigate change and continue to accomplish their tasks while we all avoid burnout.

What does the literature say about middle managers?

Chang and Bright (2012) identify ways middle manager roles have changed due to technology and the ease of accessing information. Communication skills are more important now than ever to a successful manager. Communication flows between colleagues at the same hierarchical level (horizontal) or between a manager and their employee, whether it is the manager providing information to the employee or the

employee communicating information to their manager (vertical), and other employees at different hierarchical levels even if they are not in the same department (Holzwarth et al., 2021). No longer do we need to just gather information and provide it to administrators; they can do that for themselves. We must translate the information into meaningful conversations that support our work. Chang and Bright (2012) also point out the importance of being adaptable to change, cultivating partnerships both internally and externally, the ability to think freely and be innovative, and providing a work environment where people feel valued and trusted. The Information Age has increased the importance of skillful communication and social support, especially for managers.

In another analysis of library middle management, Gordon (2020) emphasizes the importance of relationship building. Middle managers must work closely with library administrators, other managers, and colleagues they manage so it is important to have collegial relationships with each of these groups. "Middle managers in successful libraries are open to change, lead by example, earn their colleagues' trust and respect, and strategically understand the technical and social fabric of their organizational units" (Gordon, p. 50). Relationship building is key to getting colleagues and those within a department to trust the manager. If there is no trust, it is very difficult to lead. I would say that a large percentage of my job involves navigating relationships that can be very complicated. As a leader in the middle my work is fluid and changes depending on the situation. For example, if I am implementing a project that is initiated by the head of the library, I am responsible for getting that done because it is a directive of the administration. I am not the initiator in this example. However, there are other instances where I am the visionary, and I can initiate a project within my department as the leader. Communicating these changing responsibilities to faculty librarians within the department is important for clear communication and getting the librarians full support and building trust and teamwork. Librarians who do not have management roles do not always understand why certain projects have priority nor do they have the insight to see five or ten years down the road and the impact these initiatives will have. Communication from the department head should be honest and include the department in looking at the "big picture" of our mission and longer-term goals as well as expectations of the department. Middle managers must take into account not only expectations that they have of their own department, but the expectations from upper-level middle management about what they need to get done.

Ericka Patillo (2018) noted in her research that expectations for middle managers can be muddy. Middle managers experience internal conflict in their positions when they are a leader but only to a certain degree. "Middle managers are vulnerable to role conflict and role ambiguity because of the nature of their positions. Middle managers hold boundary-spanning positions that put them in contact with a variety of employees, operations, strategies and clients" (Patillo, 2018, p. 2). Patillo (2018) also notes that managers in the middle who have more authority (power) are viewed by employees within their department differently than those who may send conflicting messages or have less power within the organization. This phenomenon can make it difficult to manage other professionals who discount the ability of the manager to enact change or control the vision of the department. Literature outside the field of librarianship looks more closely at power dynamics and how they influence the role of the middle manager. The term "vertical code-switching" has been used to explain the mental switch that happens when people move from one role to another role (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). Depending on one's perception of the level of power that they have, the psychological switch can be mentally taxing. Power is not only defined in terms of status in the organization, but is also defined by a person's sense of power. It may not matter to a department head whether they control the direction of the library. What may matter the most is the person's ability to influence their department to be able to carry out the vision. Middle managers have to reconcile their roles to avoid psychological exhaustion. Such role ambiguity can also make it challenging to identify a leadership style that will work well for middle managers.

Anicich and Hirsh (2017) do suggest that organizations should consider simplifying the vertical structure as much as possible. For middle managers who do become mentally and physically exhausted, having one direct supervisor can ease the impact of vertical code switching.

Leadership styles

The literature on leadership styles in academic libraries pre-pandemic is plentiful, but the application of these styles to middle management is sparse. Much of the focus is on library administrators. Here I will analyze four leadership styles that each offer lessons for middle managers during an era of COVID-19. I find transformational leadership dominates the library literature. What is not as readily available is an analysis of leadership styles that are effective during times of civil unrest and pandemic. It is imperative to investigate current theories of leadership and examine them in light of the pandemic.

Transformational leadership

According to Wilson (2020), the American Library Association has been a champion for the transformational style of leadership since 2009. "Transformational leadership relies on personal charisma, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration of followers' needs in order to build that person to their highest potential" (Wilson, 2020, p. 732). This leadership style is seen as very effective for helping library staff to deal with change that happens within libraries. It is interesting to note that transformational leadership has been championed as a recommended style for libraries, but other leadership styles have not been considered as much (Wilson, 2020). Personality is a key factor in transformational leadership and requires managers to be charismatic. The theory behind transformational leadership dates back to 1978 and political sociologist James Mac Gregor Burns (Baba, 2017), who was interested in what motivates people to follow leaders. A well-known leader that utilized this style is Sam Walton (Farnsworth et al., 2020) from the Walmart Corporation. In a study conducted by Arapasopo and Adekoya (2021), transformational leadership was found to be effective at responding to the fast changes that needed to happen to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, employees reported that leaders who exhibited a transformational leadership style were able to inspire and keep workers motivated to continue operations as libraries were pressured to stay open and offer services to the public while other services were shut down. However, Wilson (2020) argues that transformational leadership alone is not sufficient for enacting change within libraries. Democratic leadership style is aligned with the thinking that library employees are motivated not just by charismatic leadership, but also by being able to take part in decision making. Transformational leadership is more effective when combined with democratic leadership. As we know well enough by now, COVID-19 and social unrest are long term problems. Is transformational leadership alone enough to sustain satisfaction among library employees?

Democratic leadership

Democratic leadership allows employees to be more involved in the process of decision making within their departments (Wilson, 2020). Shared governance, where librarians have input in library policies, fits in with this type of style (SUNY). While transformational leadership relies heavily on the manager's skills, democratic leadership promotes a great deal of collaboration from people within the department. This can be helpful in taking advantage of every person's strengths. Rather than relying on the manager to carry the load of motivation by themselves, other team members can fill in where the manager has a weakness or just to help distribute the "load". Wilson (2020) asserts that transformational leadership can be effective, but when a manager uses techniques of democratic leadership as well, employees will feel more valued. For democratic leadership to be effective, managers have to build

relationships with everyone in their departments. Trust is key, and trust cannot be earned if there is no relationship building. "Feedback, communication, recognition, frequent interaction and listening skills are critical to empowering workers and building relationships" (Wilson, 2020, p. 738).

But what happens when employees are burned out? What happens when there is social unrest in society along with a health crisis? Transformational leadership and democratic leadership address behaviors and motivation but do not emphasize social responsibility or how a person's life outside of the organization can impact their work. I experienced an additional amount of burnout and stress when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and I know that my library colleagues did as well. I noticed that many people showed more concern for the common good and were paying attention to the injustices in society. These injustices were magnified in 2020 by racialized harassment and killings by police that amplified the movement for Black Lives and by the pandemic's greater impact on marginalized communities: people of color, people living in poverty and the elderly. Benevolent leadership is a style that considers these types of issues and how they impact the workplace.

Benevolent leadership

Benevolent leadership is "a process of creating a virtuous cycle of encouraging, initiating and implementing positive change in organizations through: a) ethical decision making and moral actions, b) developing spiritual awareness and creating a sense of meaning, c) inspiring hope and fostering courage for positive action, and d) leaving a legacy and positive impact for the larger community" (Grego-Planer, 2022, p. 2). An example of this type of leadership at the administrative level comes to mind when thinking about how corporations were developing diversity statements or taking action against police brutality in 2020 when George Floyd was killed during the pandemic by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It seemed to me that the world stood still as we locked down at home and concentrated our attention on this issue and protests. Some corporate leaders stepped up with funding to help combat social injustices that were magnified during the pandemic. For example, some companies have committed to having a certain number of products from black-owned businesses on their shelves which helps increase generational wealth in the Black community, which in-turn helps change inequity in society (Bawab and Repko, 2021). Another example of benevolent leadership at our University was the administration calling on IT and the Libraries to gather every laptop on campus to be loaned to students facing online classes without sufficient technology of their own. Many students still do not have access to computers at home, so this was a way to level the playing field and provide a resource outside of the library for the common good.

These are examples at a larger system level, but the techniques can be applied within a library department to help the middle manager support employees. In Eastern literature, benevolent leadership emphasizes caring and Confucian concepts which can result in more positive attitudes in the workplace. If the department head shows a level of caring and is willing to coach an employee, they promote a supportive environment. During COVID-19 the benevolent leadership style became essential for employees. Corporations, University Administration, and even middle managers seemed mostly to rise to the crisis to help our employees as they navigated threats and challenges. The field of librarianship is naturally one that is giving and has the common good in mind, but this is not to say the field does not have a downside. Much like healthcare workers or first responders, librarians work can come at an expense of self-care which may result in burnout. This was already a problem before COVID-19, and the pandemic exacerbated the burnout that many librarians already experience. Trauma is a very real concern for many people, including librarians. Society is dealing with collective trauma and library managers cannot ignore this concern. This is an opportunity for us to understand trauma-informed leadership and how we can utilize this style in the library as well.

Trauma-informed leadership

Trauma-informed leadership is usually discussed in terms of understanding the trauma within marginalized populations. However, we all have identities that we have to reconcile in our workplace, personal lives, familial relationships, and in society. Mental health awareness has come to the forefront even more in the pandemic. It is my observation that middle managers in the library do not have enough knowledge about how to utilize trauma-informed leadership techniques. "Trauma-informed leaders continuously work to understand the emotional dimensions of relational and organizational life and consider how trauma histories play out in learning situations, experiences, and contexts" (Ravitch, 2020, p. 7). Middle managers are the first line of leadership to library employees and need to be aware of the stressors and mental health of the people they manage. Many people's trauma has been exacerbated by the pandemic. If we ignore this reality, we will continue to see employees leave their jobs or exhibit decreased performance levels. Middle managers must have compassion and not only recognize the impact of trauma in their employees, but also in their own lives. Managers may have belief systems or mindsets and live within a framework that does not allow them to acknowledge their employees' trauma and accept that it is a real factor in performance within the library. The only way to get past our own way of thinking is to educate ourselves about people who have different experiences and identities and what they are going through. In her book, "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services," Rebecca Tolley (2020) provides practical tips to integrate trauma-informed leadership into our work and encourages managers to promote self-care practices in their department, among their employees (and themselves). This can include bringing in speakers to talk about navigating daily life with mindfulness, fun programs such as therapy dogs, and encouraging people to take breaks throughout the day. Letting people know that it is okay to ask for help is also important, as is ensuring employees do not take on more projects than they can handle or share the work in order to avoid burnout. Simply having conversations with the employees they manage, to check-in and see how things are going, shows an important level of care. Middle managers cannot change organizational culture or control institutional policies, but they can make their own department more comfortable for their employees with this approach, and sometimes that makes all the difference.

A new path forward for middle managers during COVID-19

With so many types of leadership styles, how does a middle manager lead during the pandemic? There are many more styles of leadership that have not been analyzed in this column. The most important thing is that middle managers in the academic library pay attention to their style and ask themselves if what they are doing is effective. That they reflect on what types of changes can be made for the better and if their management style is accounting for the impact that COVID-19 and other traumas have had on the people in their department is essential. I offer the following suggestions for middle managers who want to become better leaders in a time where we are all dealing with ongoing issues because of a pandemic.

1. Educate yourself. There is literature on how to be an effective leader, although the library literature is not as extensive. I have learned that it is important to read outside of the field as some other areas such as business and education have a great deal of research available on various leadership styles, such as the ones mentioned in this paper. I think that a combination of techniques from the transformational, democratic, benevolent, and trauma-informed leadership styles will be beneficial during the time of COVID-19 and future crises.
2. Develop your own style that incorporates the techniques that you value and that will also be useful to your department. A department has unique characteristics depending on the individuals within the

department. What may work for some people, may not work for others.

3. Practice self-care. Increasing emphasis has been placed on this, and while we must promote this within our departments, we cannot forget about ourselves. Each day we are trying to survive the squeeze of being in the middle. Making time for self-care can help avoid burnout for the middle manager. You cannot pour from an empty cup.

4. Reconcile your role. If you need clarity on what your role is as a middle manager, think about the expectations that your supervisor and your employees have of you. Do you have power to control policy, or is it your role to get your department to conform to the policies of the institution? Remember that power is not always about the control you have over institutional decisions. Your attitude and viewpoint in your role are going to make you effective or ineffective as a middle manager.

COVID-19 is a complex phenomenon that has brought many issues, such as health and social inequity, to the forefront. The workplace has been changed forever because of the pandemic. Many librarians left and are leaving their jobs and reconsidering their careers. "In moments like these, when the choices we make are so impactful, people desperately want to believe that their leaders know what they are doing. But they quickly learn that in times like these, leaders either grow or swell–they both grow out of their weaknesses and rise to the level of the challenge or all of their worst weaknesses swell to new levels" (Tom Friedman as cited in Kalra et al., 2021, p. 688). During this time of crisis, we are being called on to grow and learn effective ways to lead from the middle.

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