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Above and Beyond: Facing your Fears at the PNLA Leadership Institute

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Above and Beyond:
Facing Your Fears at the PNLA Leadership Institute

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Areas with growth potential in librarianship

I see an interesting trend and a definite need in academic libraries for Blended Librarians who are part librarians and part instructional designers. Information about this can be found on the Blended Librarian Web site at blendedlibrarian.org

—NANCY HOOVER
University Librarian,
Shoen Library,
Marylhurst University

I swung the flashlight nervously in front of me, illuminating dense trees, rocks, and an ice-covered brook as I crunched along the gravel path to the hidden chalet. It was past midnight, prime time for mountain carnivores to be out and about. "Every step," I thought, "might be covering the approach of a hungry bear." Freezing in the dark, hundreds of miles from home, I carried only a bundle of tear-stained papers clutched to my chest, and a plastic flashlight to defend myself.

Although this sounds like an episode of Fear Factor, it's actually a scene from the week I spent at the 2006 Pacific Northwest Library Association Leadership Institute at Tamarack Resort in Donnelly, Idaho. I was traipsing through the forest in the middle of the night after working for hours on our group's homework assignment: to write a comprehensive mission statement for 32 representatives from school, public, academic, and medical libraries from across the Pacific Northwest.

While not every activity I engaged in entailed this sense of drama, it was pretty intense. The tear stains on the papers, for example, were real. During small group work one afternoon, I realized one of my strengths was also one of my greatest weaknesses: I hold myself to perfectionist-grade standards. Okay, not the end of the world, but I hold everyone else to them too, which is unrealistic and alienating for those forced to endure my squinting disapproval. People thought I was a snob because, well, I was. I burst into tears at the unfairness of my judgment and vowed to start giving my colleagues (and myself) a break. There were nods all around at my breakthrough. I made progress and accomplished one of my personal goals: to be uncomfortable socially and live through it.

I'd made that decision the first evening, when we staggered into the dining room after the lengthy bus ride up the mountain.

I wanted to embrace the opportunity to really work on my "areas for improvement." This included confidence in situations with unknown humans possessing "greater institutional value" than myself. I sat alone at a table and waited. Eventually the room filled and conversations began: our flights, what library systems we were from, and what we thought of the facilities. This was enough interaction with strangers to make my skin crawl. I felt like I was starring in my own personal version of the movie "Clue." I didn't know how I ended up there, when it would be revealed that I was a fraud, and who would announce to the room that I had been seen with the Candlestick when I entered the Billiard Room with Mrs. Peacock. But I stayed through the whole gut-twisting affair without once hiding in the bathroom, as I promised myself.

My roommates were perfectly nice, which made them scary. The first morning I regarded them warily over breakfast, afraid if I spoke something would give me away. We walked in silence to the conference room. I wrung my hands hoping no one would ask about my nonexistent library school degree. I was sure I would be outed as somehow less than complete by my companions.

I kept quiet until the first session, where it was revealed that the focus of the activities wasn't about who had the most schooling or made the most money. Directors, management, support staff and librarians, it was made clear, were all equal, worthwhile, professional contributors in all activities. Jon Shannon and Becky Schreiber, the Institute's excellent, knowledgeable facilitators, expected and got buy-in from every person (a meeting maneuver I hope to replicate someday) on this point. Reassured and sort of shocked by this agreement and all the welcoming personalities, by the end of the week my roommates and I were inseparable, folding each other's laundry while trading library war stories, MLS or no.

The idea that each of the 32 participants were equal assisted in that beloved meeting tradition everywhere: creating ground rules. We were all encouraged to stand up for what we wanted to get out of our "meetings." (The declaration went something like this: "Those of you that interrupt- self-regulate. Those of you finding yourself interrupted- stand up for yourselves.") Ground rules tend to be a meaningless phenomenon that, when discussed, get met with eye rolls. The only way around this is to make ground rules only if you intend to honor the agreement. They are the place where everyone, regardless of position, has power. Like the Constitution, they should be part of a living document that the group can overthrow if necessary. Considering that we had signed up for what was basically a series of back to back meetings over five days, it was valuable that we spent significant time discussing the basics of what it means to have a meeting, and how to run them fairly.

The focus for the week wasn't actually about making everyone feel equal, but about self-awareness. It seems so basic now, but it's easily overlooked. I realized quite quickly that my tendency to seem aloof was anchored in the misinformation I told myself about my abilities. "I don't really know what I'm talking about because I don't have my degree," and "No one wants to hear what I have to say; I'll just quietly do my work," were just a couple of the negative thought nuggets I snuggled with. My instincts also told me there was no reason to spend time talking to people at work if it wasn't going to help "get the job done."

I spent lots of time wrestling with my interpersonal demons, which was encouraged, and exactly what I needed to become more confident and less of a social liability. It turned out my gut was wrong. I learned the advantage of "managing up" from a subordinate position using different methods of communication adaptable to different personality types (something I previously found scary if not impossible). It dawned on me that strategic (but authentic) relationships are critical to the health of the work group. When there's trouble, it can be tackled by people already in a position to negotiate simply because they're known to each other. Being social can help get the job done!

And it turns out that self-examination isn't just for monks anymore. By saying "Okay, this is what's on my plate emotionally and mentally. How can I work around or utilize (!) these things to achieve the library's goals?" has become something I literally ask myself every day, because despite feelings or circumstances, it's my decision to react professionally and take positive action.

As far as social skills go, I'm in a much more optimistic place that turned out to have a very simple route: I model the be-

havior I want to see in others. People reflect their surroundings and environment, and I try to take the opportunity to make it good.

So, I didn't run into any bears on my midnight journey in the Idahoan wilderness. Instead, I ran the last twenty yards to the front door, fumbled with the key, and collapsed into the front room of the chalet, berating myself for getting freaked out. Then I remembered I was not only keeping myself from being mauled, but protecting valuable documents as well.

Mission Statement for the 2006 PNLA Leadership Institute

We commit to position the library as a relevant essential presence in all communities.

We welcome our community into a dynamic space for enrichment and life long learning.

We reflect the vibrant diversity of our communities in our collections, services, and staff.

We provide opportunities for all staff to develop their talents, assuring excellent customer service.

We initiate strategic partnerships to maximize resources and encourage community ownership and pride.

We embrace innovative technology to cultivate an information literate society.

Overheard Wisdom from the 2006 PNLA Leadership Institute

If you're not failing now and then, you're probably not trying hard enough.

If you say something and no one hears you, then you haven't said it.

Energy follows attention. Most managers spend 40 percent of their time dealing with three percent of their staff.

We have to figure out how to not do 'that angry library staff thing" where we intimidate people out of the library by making them feel stupid.

Why don't we ever ask what makes a good library patron?

Is it possible that our organization's cynics are just disappointed optimists?

Use uncomfortable feelings as a road sign. Ask "Why?" and "What can I do?" Learn to value the discomfort.

Technology is the form of delivery, not the thing itself.

If you find yourself needing to rebuild a relationship, take 51 percent of the responsibility, even if you don't believe it. It will encourage the other party to act in kind.

If you decide to dance with the bear, you don't get to sit down when you're tired.

Recommended Reads/References

Galdwell, Malcom. 2000. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Chaleff, Ira. 1995. *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Bellman. Geoffrey M. 2001. *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.