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### Wellbeing, EDIB, and the Promise of Leadership Development

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**Column Title:** Leadership Reflections

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**Column Editor Notes:** Leadership skills are essential to creating libraries that are effective and relevant in their communities. While some individuals seem to possess inherent leadership capabilities, it is possible to develop and strengthen skills to effectively lead a department, unit, or organization. This column explores ways for librarians and library workers to improve their knowledge and abilities as they lead their units, libraries, communities, and the library profession. Interested authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at [schlak@rmu.edu](mailto:schlak@rmu.edu).

**Title:** Wellbeing, EDIB, and the Promise of Leadership Development

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**Abstract:** Morale research over the past several years documents a crisis in the library profession and a 2021 report by Ithaka S+R reveals a confidence deficit in library administrators around work towards equity, diversity, inclusivity and belonging. The connections between belonging, resilience, and morale are strong and immediate action is required to address the crisis. This article posits that a strategic approach to leadership development, with a focus on coaching, is key to bridging the gap. Authentic and adaptive leadership models as supportive strategies are explored and a coaching approach to management is presented to launch readers into their next action.

**Keywords:** belonging; wellbeing; leadership development; morale; equity, diversity, and inclusivity; coaching

## Introduction

Recent literature indicates that there are deep and disturbing morale issues in libraries (Kendrick, 2017) and that they are profound for library workers of color (Kendrick & Damasco, 2019). At the same time, research by Ithaka S+R (2021) demonstrates that library leaders do not feel confident in their strategies to lead and manage around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. We see a connection between belonging, resilience, and morale and we believe that leadership development, with a focus on coaching is key to bridging the gap. As a person-centered process of discovery, coaching can raise awareness of blind spots, perceptions, assumptions, support, challenges, and underlying emotions. Coaches help coachees tap into inner sources of resilience and external forms of support to weather challenges and continue moving forward. Our experience, as library directors who completed programs in leadership coaching, respectively focusing on diversity (Vogel – Coach Diversity’s certified professional diversity program) and wellbeing (Erickson – George Mason University’s certificate program in Leadership Coaching for Organizational Wellbeing), provides us with a unique lens through which to view these challenges for library leaders.

### **Establishing the problem & Ithaka S+R study confidence findings**

The morale crisis within libraries isn’t unique to our profession, yet we cannot be complacent. Kendrick’s (2017) research shows that the problem that exists in workplace culture broadly is very much present in libraries. She outlines key impact factors:

*Insidious experience development* – Kendrick (2017) describes this as “the inability to recognize low morale or its harmful effects while the experience was ongoing” (p. 869). In some cases, individuals may not realize that they were in a low morale experience until they move on to another environment.

*Contagion* – Kendrick (2017) discusses the impact of the supervisor in the low morale experience, indicating that participants in the study described supervisors who were also experiencing low morale and who were sometimes assuming responsibility for managing the low morale of those they supervised.

*Enabling systems* - Systems, such as faculty status/tenure, can contribute to abuse in the workplace and to employees’ feelings of being stuck. The limitations of human resources to address workplace abuse and the perceptions of librarianship were also highlighted in the study as factors contributing to the persistence of low morale experiences. Chronic understaffing and “uncertainty and mistrust” were listed by Kendrick (2017) as contributors, as was “absent, ambivalent, laissez-faire, or apathetic” leadership.

Kendrick & Damasco (2019) expanded on the impact factors identified previously in Kendrick’s work and further outlines impact factors specific to the experience of minority library employees. Two factors that stand out as potentially ameliorated through leadership development and coaching:

*Stereotype threat* - A situation in which an individual is aware of a negative stereotype about their group and, in an attempt to disassociate themselves from it, work in a way that counters any connotations of the stereotype. This can result in overworking or feeling that they have to exceed the performance of their colleagues to prove themselves worthy.

*Deauthentication* - This arises when individuals feel that they cannot bring their whole selves to work. They manage aspects of themselves that they feel would not be viewed positively in the workplace.

As Kendrick & Damasco (2019) note, these are “internal responses” in the low morale experience. Leadership development and coaching could support minority librarians experiencing these factors as well as raise awareness in coworkers of these potential internal responses.

One factor Kendrick & Damasco (2019) cite as an organizational issue that could be addressed through group coaching and cultural awareness:

*Diversity rhetoric* - This occurs when what is said as being valued is different in the lived experience of BIPOC employees. A library that has a strong EDI statement, but does not actively work to live up to that statement is an example of diversity rhetoric. Kendrick and Damasco’s study “reveals how diversity initiatives and programs instigate or exacerbate low-morale experiences” and that they contribute to “tokenism, marginalization, diversity labor, superficiality and pushback” (195).

In a further exploration of what is needed to support minority academic librarians as they navigate the predominantly white world of academic librarianship, Kendrick shared the following in the Ithaka S+R webinar on “National Movements for Racial Justice and Academic Library Leadership” (Ithaka S+R, 2021):

“What BIPOC really needs is time away from this work. If you’re going to ask them to do this work, give them time away because it’s a weathering in their spirits, in their minds, and their bodies. Black and brown bodies who do this work are passionate about this work, and we know about vocational awe and how passion weathers people in general, and so this is almost like a double, triple weathering.

And not time away to reflect, time to be away from the work so they can disconnect from it. I think that’s what I recommend in terms of wellbeing and the real effects of emotional labor and associated physical weathering of EDI work.”

Higher education is in crisis, and the pandemic has compounded what was already an environment of increasingly low morale. The working world is changing; employees are resigning in record numbers, as shown by the popularity of the social media hashtag #greatresignation. While some decisions may be purely economic, people are often questioning their livelihoods and whether their work allows them to live their values. Academic libraries already have a retention problem when it comes to BIPOC librarians and as the 2020 Ithaka S+R US Library Survey has shown there is a correlation between jobs eliminated in ARL libraries recently and job categories that have more employees

of color. “Thus, at least at ARL institutions and potentially more broadly, it does appear that employees of color have been disproportionately impacted” (Frederick & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021, p. 18). We are at a crisis point in terms of the recruitment, retention, and promotion of librarians of color and it will only get worse if no action is taken.

There is a strong connection between belonging and wellbeing (Thushyan, 2021). If a person does not feel that they belong in an organization, that they cannot bring their whole self to work and be supported for who they are, then their wellbeing is at stake. Kendrick’s work cites numerous examples of individuals whose health was compromised due to low morale in the workplace. Belonging is a key component of morale and addressing belonging in the workplace could go a long way to addressing low morale. Support for wellbeing and belonging must be instilled in the organizational culture, as well as targeted to the individual. Moving forward requires either starting points or validation of approaches, which is offered in the next section of this column.

### **How leadership development supports well-being and belonging**

*Culture* is a set of collective norms for behaviors adopted by a group of people. Cultural anthropology establishes that it is learned and adopted by group members, shaped by the whole. Culture becomes embedded in the practices, procedures, and policies of libraries. Further, historical narratives about library identity and values (e.g., objective, unbiased) extend influence into the present through socialization in teams or graduate programs.

Command-and-control leadership models have extensively shaped workplaces. Most notable, Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), was built upon the premise that it is the manager’s responsibility to determine *one right way* for workers to do their job, removing autonomy and voice from the individuals. It consolidated decisions regarding ability, development, and roles to a central authority. This mindset is now evident throughout industries, popular culture, and governance practices in the United States. Even a short reflection on this approach reveals shortcomings when used in the Information Age. It points to the imperative of leaders and organizations to embrace different leadership models and implement development initiatives to move beyond this morale-damaging approach. It is vital to recognize the pervasiveness of this way of thinking and how it influences organizational cultures.

In contrast, *authentic leadership* and *adaptive leadership* models support approaches where individual agency and voice are valued, sought, and protected. These are the two dominant models which have informed our approaches to leadership and management. We see promise for how well-being and belonging can remedy the morale crisis common in libraries through each of these models. Supporting, encouraging and funding plans for leadership development for all team members is a necessity.

Kaetrena Davis Kendrick has pointed out the imperative for “consistent application of the values of ALA” to address the crisis and value work on DEIB (Ithaka S+R, 2021). As practicing librarians, we see ourselves called to action through one of the fundamental tenets in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association (ALA, 1995). It asserts

“We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions,” which demands attention to morale for everyone in the profession and particular care to understand and act in regards to the lived experiences of our BIPOC colleagues.

Formal and informal leadership development programs should align management philosophies that fit the desired values for the organization and the profession. Further individual development must emphasize the leader within every person. Recognizing and growing agency, boundaries, initiative, ability to impact culture, strengths, and inner saboteurs is crucial to addressing our morale crisis. Never has there been more reason to be intentional about developing a personal leadership philosophy and aligning it with a new foundational leadership model.

Leadership coaching (also known as executive coaching) supports individuals and teams in profound, transformational growth through an inquiry-based, future-focused, action-oriented, person-centered development opportunity in which the coach and coachee co-create an exploration of issues and outcomes important to the coachee. The coach asks questions that challenge assumptions and tap into prior experience to gain confidence in approaching new problems. Coaching can provide clarity in times of uncertainty and can create new awareness. The coach helps identify obstacles and opportunities, and prompts the coachee to create a way to move forward. As a relatively untapped option within libraries, coaching is vital to develop resilience, given the tenacity of the *command-and-control* leadership concept in American society. Group and individual development need support in addressing the morale crisis.

“A coaching culture in an organization speaks of a strategy that embodies a coach-like mindset and approach to the way of working within the organization that encourages employee engagement, productivity, and performance. These characteristics enable a good communication ethos where ALL employees are enabled to listen attentively, respecting each employee as the expert of their own lives and their work, to be curious in asking questions instead of always “telling,” to maintain open and honest communication within a safe and trusting environment without judgement and fear of retribution leading to increased employee motivation and productivity; and it encourages learning and development of employees so that employees are enabled and equipped to fulfil [sic] their responsibilities” (Thurtell, 2021, para. 3).

### **Roles in creating a healthy, resilient culture**

Everyone has a role in remediating morale issues, creating a healthy, resilient culture, and advancing workplaces where inclusivity and belonging are valued and fostered. Given the readership of this journal, our primary focus is on those in formal leadership roles (e.g. deans and directors, unit managers). As the Ithaca S+R report demonstrates, there is a gap between the confidence level of library leaders with regard to EDIB and the level of importance they see it having in their organizations. The case is clear that the status quo cannot continue.

The will and resolve of the director set the trajectory for the entire organization. Without it, team members—whether managers or individual contributors—are essentially working with a significant obstacle for lasting change. As is noted regularly in *how-to's* on leadership work: leaders communicate the values and priorities of the organization through their words and actions.

Consider, again, for a moment the pervasiveness of *command-and-control* in society and therefore in socializations for library management, whether through coursework, mentoring, or other means of communicating what expectations are. As Dawes states in the Ithaka S+R webinar:

“We operate in a system of whiteness. Even directors of color will, intentionally or not, play into this system. So to truly address issues of racial equity requires a lot of time, it requires a lot of energy and it also requires some resources, all of which are in short supply. But they are in short supply, only if addressing these issues is not a priority. I think it is up to us to make it a priority to address these issues.” (Ithaka S+R, 2021).

Deans and directors have a catalyst role in addressing morale issues by incorporating a more participatory leadership style. These individuals may have inherited an organization in distress or may be realizing the negative impacts of Taylorism that show up in library organizations. Leaders must step forward at this moment to say *not in this team anymore*. In the Ithaka S+R webinar, Patricia Hwse, program officer at the Mellon Foundation, advocated for the leaders “to operationalize anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-accessibility practices across the organization ... thoughtfully, transparently, and possibly in co-leadership approaches” (Ithaka S+R, 2021).

Having established that the old “command and control” approach is bound to fail in the post-Industrial Revolution age, it is crucial to consider the alternatives. Leadership scholars Haifetz and Linsky (2009) posit in their theory of *adaptive leadership* that there are six behaviors for the leader(s) to adopt for an organization to thrive. These include:

- Get off the dancefloor and onto the balcony [i.e., see patterns more easily]
- Identify the adaptive challenge [i.e., how human behavior is involved or to be impacted]
- Regulate distress [i.e., to ensure conditions are aligned]
- Maintain your disciplined attention [i.e., be mindful and present]
- Give work back to the people [i.e., genuinely invest authority and scope of autonomy]
- Protect the voices [of others, particularly those not in traditionally named leadership roles]

Likewise, in the *authentic leadership* approach, transparency and living one’s values and purpose are critical to meeting the organization’s needs. Striving to build meaningful relationships within teams creates a foundation from which genuine connections enable honest communication. In George’s (2003) authentic leadership model, self-care in its various forms is valued and the leader is attentive to their

well-being and that of team members. One can see how more attention to these aspects in our organizations would improve conditions and set out a path worth following.

The contexts of library deans and directors apply directly as well for unit managers across the organization. Middle managers have an outsized role in shaping day-to-day work experience within functional teams. Therefore, they warrant investment by the organization to support their development and how middle managers address systemic problems. The profession could do more to support those managing from the middle, and the new [Conference on Academic Library Management \(CALM\)](#) is an excellent step forward in supporting the well-being and development of those current and aspiring managers.

Leaders must commit to the continuous and necessary growth and evolution of our workplaces to be healthy and impactful in our communities. Overestimating or underestimating any individual role within a library will continue the untenable situation around us.

### **Hurdles/obstacles or counter-arguments**

Obstacles and hurdles in this work are real. Yet, at times, they loom more significant than they actually are. Naming the imperfections of our conditions is a critical way of facing and defanging them. Through this, we can recognize where opportunities lie despite barriers. Obstacles can appear in many forms: the larger organization isn't ready or otherwise in alignment, necessary resources (time, funds, etc.) are elusive, the in-unit status quo is deeply entrenched, and/or resilience is low, and risk-aversion is high. The picture reveals two dimensions: the landscape around us and a self-limiting belief. Looking at the complex realities with sufficient clarity opens up opportunities to check assumptions and find our way around the barriers we perceive. With each obstacle, coaching questions can help us put them in perspective and open a path out from giving them more power than they deserve in our work.

We have identified several of the most common arguments and offered contextual framing around those. For each one, we share a coaching question or two that could prompt a resilient way of approaching the topic.

Larger readiness or alignment: 'My larger organization isn't [ready, interested]\_\_. All of the departments around here operate like this.'

While necessary to consider the context within which one is working, it is clear from the research above that perils surround us and lie ahead for the profession and broader organizations if we do not accelerate mitigating the work environment crisis.

*Question: how might the work you could do on this now help your larger organization become ready? How might we demonstrate leadership in new ways?*

Resource availability: 'I don't have enough [people, funds]\_\_\_\_\_.'

As library professionals, we are accustomed to the refrain of "not enough" and live in spaces that draw us into the world of "if only's." Yet, we can look around us and see others who deliver in conditions similar to our own. As Trevor Dawes says in the

Ithaka S+R study webinar, it is not so much a lack of resources; it is a matter of prioritizing resources (Ithaka S+R, 2021).

Question: *If you gave new ways of working, which emphasize belonging, well-being, morale, and inclusion, prominent prioritization, and you recalibrated all existing resources around that, what could your library accomplish?*

Internal status quo: 'We have so much tradition/experience/investment/expertise built into how we do things. And it's *how things are done here.*'

Pfeffer and Sutton vividly describe this mentality as "memory as a substitute for thinking" in their book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (2000). Being trapped here sets a trajectory that will lose talent and cause organizations to wither even in the face of new opportunities.

Question: *What are ways that past approaches have stopped serving you well in this present moment? How can the approaches you just identified be used to illuminate new paths?*

Resilience and risk-aversion: 'I just don't think we can make an impact,' or 'What if we make things worse while trying to do the right thing?'

Fear and perfectionism can prevent leaders from taking the first step. Yet the paralysis or shrinking into something smaller than we are capable of being is to succumb to conditions that hold back everyone. Once we let go of the arguments that create paralyzing high-stakes views, we are able to seek out or articulate the options that lie before us.

Question: *If I envision myself knowing what to do, the next thing I would do is:*

\_\_\_\_\_.

In these obstacles, we face genuine hurdles and self-limiting beliefs about how they paralyze our work. We can find ourselves in a mindset of helplessness, giving up in ways that perpetuate the negativities surrounding us. When we find ourselves "stuck" making these as our arguments, a potential antidote is turning toward personal leadership development.

Coaching methodologies offer a transformative pathway to facing and maneuvering around obstacles and barriers, whether at the individual level or in the organizational sphere. Moving to action is crucial in addressing the morale crisis and all the ways we fall short of our professional values.

### **Our call to action**

The next steps to take are affirming, person-centered, and within reach:

- Post your north star, starting with the Code of Ethics statement from ALA. Bring it to your managers and to the whole team. Initiate conversations and set accountabilities.
- Establish EDIB as an ongoing strategic priority for your organization.
- Bring a critical eye to the leadership model characteristics at work inside your organization. Consider a cohort-based coaching approach to managerial development.
- Create a coaching culture in your organization.

- Use your network and consider conducting an audit of your network (does everyone in your network “look like/sound like you”?)
- Act with compassion in all that you do. If you focus on the humanity in each individual and channel empathy, you will create a supportive environment for each individual.
- Ask yourself: *What is one small thing you can do today to work towards what you want to see in your library/our profession?*

### **Conclusion**

The urgency around the work climate and morale crisis is apparent: lives are affected; unacceptable behaviors and conditions are dragging down the profession. With robust research now in hand, the profession has named what has been an underlying sentiment for years. By seeing it named so clearly, library administrators can launch or further seize the opportunity to address this cancer within the industry.

In coaching, we start with what we already know and where we are currently. At the center of administrative work is change management, where we are gathering perspectives to understand where we are and build a vision of where we must go. Pragmatic leaders frequently seize the opportunities as they appear, and this moment is no different. Bring what you know already to wellbeing and EDIB issues. Do what you can where you are; look for opportunities to be a catalyst for change.

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