Snapshots from participants in formal leadership development programmes

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Since starting the new CILIP Leadership Programme in July 2015, I have had the opportunity to reflect on different styles of leadership through reading the literature, participating in workshops and seeking out practical examples.

The concept of situational leadership was developed by Hershey and Blanchard (1969) but is still considered a valuable approach today. It involves analysing a situation and adopting the most appropriate leadership style. Flexible and adaptive leadership is useful, and although most people have a preferred leadership style, it is good to have a range of skills to employ. I believe in offering leadership in the context in which you work. A good thing to do first is to develop yourself, through study, networking, mentoring, CPD, leading projects, etc. Covey (1991, p. 169) argues in his *Principle-centered leadership*: 'Our leadership style can be "situational", but before we're able to make a change, we may require new mentors or models.'

It is possible, to a certain extent, to lead yourself in your area of work, although to be a true leader you need an essential ingredient: followers. There are different ways of leading and you don't necessarily have to be a manager to lead others. I work in a university library and provide services, workshops and resources for students and staff. I have also had the great experience of being a mentor for the past three years on the City University London Postgraduate Professional Mentoring scheme. I have worked with some of our Library & Information Science students on this programme by adopting a coaching style of leadership called the GROW coaching model (Whitmore, 2009). GROW stands for the four elements of this model:

- **g**oal
- **r**eality
- **o**ptions (or obstacles)
- **w**ill (or way forward)

I recently attended a CILIP Leadership workshop based on Jigsaw@work, which is a tool to help develop self-awareness and an understanding of the personal styles of others. We explored the coaching style of leadership, which is a supportive and a less directive leadership style. The role of a coach is to ask questions and act as a sounding board for the person being coached, to enable them to set goals and make their own choices and decisions. I've learned from doing the Leadership programme that it is better to be flexible and to adopt different styles depending on the situation. What works well in one context may not suit another perfectly and it is best where possible to use varied approaches and adapt your leadership style to suit the people you are leading or coaching.

Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Management of Organizational Behavior – Utilizing Human Resources. New Jersey. Prentice Hall

Covey, Stephen (1991). *Principle-centered leadership.* New York & London. Free Press

Whitmore, John (2009). *Coaching for performance: GROWing human potential and purpose: the principles and practice of coaching and leadership.* London. John Brearley

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Leading Change Institute

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During the summer of 2014 I was a Fellow in the Leading Change Institute (LCI) in Washington. The programme ran over six days, Sunday through Friday. Two deans facilitate the work of the Institute, guiding the various activities and providing thoroughly generous advice. We initially met on Sunday morning for introductions and an exercise based on the StrengthFinder / Gallop framework. The next three days revolved around a series of conversations with leaders in education and educational policy that continued far into the evenings, with a mixture of formal and informal social events. The Institute culminated in a day-long collaborative exercise on Thursday where small groups were tasked with designing a new higher education institution based on the Institute's themes and our conversations with the various leaders. Friday was dedicated to some final reflections and creating opportunities for maintaining connections made during the Institute. Further post-Institute support was made possible during the next year in the form of monthly video conferences.

The Institute was framed by six themes: self-knowledge, strategic planning, storytelling, collaboration, communication and change management. While all these themes continue to provide inspiration and food for thought, two years on, the Institute's emphasis on collaboration still resonates with me and informs my daily work. From the start of the LCI, collaboration was seen as valuable in indicating how others complement one's personal leadship skills. That indication is necessary in order to build a more complete and effective team. It acknowledges what you need from others in order to get a job done. Tasked with augmenting and shifting a traditional technical services unit towards a variety of digital, technologically-enabled and data-driven services in a challenging economic climate, I have found that the vision of collaboration articulated at the LCI has allowed me to move elements of my work forward. For instance, to accommodate a growing digital collection, staff at the Glucksman Library at the University of Limerick have been extending their work with traditional MARC21-based cataloguing into a further range of metadata formats used for digital objects. Finding the space and skills to make this expansion possible has meant working across and through organisational boundaries in an entirely different way. Interestingly, the degree to which we have had to work differently with one another in our seventeen-member Technical and Digital Services Unit has had as much of an effect on implementing the new services as the technical changes necessary for the services. Collaboration in this fashion has had a huge effect on traditional roles. An important lesson for me has been that the how of the collaboration (the manner and depth to which it has been done) is as important as the what (the specific mechanical or technical steps). In this sense, collaboration has not only allowed me to effect certain changes but has also made future innovation possible. A fundamental takeaway for me from the LCI has been that the higher education environment is very much a world in flux, where ambiguity and uncertainty are central. The willingness to engage though in deeper, transformative instances of collaboration offers the prospect of meeting the uncertainties directly.

Snapshots from participants in formal leadership development programmes

CILIP Leadership Programme
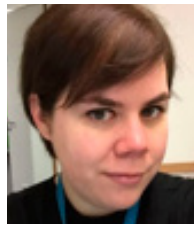
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The theory

In my position at South Essex College I manage a department and ten members of staff. Prior to my start, a restructure had provided new arrangements but not a new mind-set or a vision. A perfect opportunity for a wannabe leader. Prior to taking part in CILIP's Leadership Programme in its pilot year, my experience of leadership consisted of operating with one goal, common sense and my team in mind. I applied to the Leadership Programme thinking that I would benefit from a more academic, structured approach to leadership. During the course, we learned about different aspects of leadership. The aspects that particularly resonated with me were people management and learning about how your personality affects your leadership style.

The practice

During the course of the Leadership Programme I think I did really well at learning the theory and strategies, but it was not until halfway through the course that it all fell into place in a light bulb moment. After a draining and stressful term, I realised I had slipped from leader back to manager. My team had a different view of what my position was and this affected my workload.

Part of the course requirements is to keep a development plan and it was highly helpful to determine what I needed to do in order to restore my leadership. I have now set myself clear objectives to be more assertive, to establish and present a clear vision for the department with timelines for separate goals. Another aspect of regaining my position as leader is to build myself a stronger, less emotional work persona.

I think one aspect of leadership that is overlooked is mental health and the toll of forging your identity. I take the most important advice about leadership from Carol Brey-Casiano 'Take care of yourself. Whenever I hear of a friend or colleague who is taking on a new leadership position, the first thing I do is encourage that person to start […] a healthy lifestyle. Being a leader takes stamina.'

I think that this is a difficult shift for me personally, but thanks to CILIP's Leadership Programme I have a solid theoretical background and examples from my peers to support and frame my thinking. I don't think I would be able to transition from manager to leader without the leadership programme.

Recommended reading

Bell, S. (2013). Skills for leading libraries in the future / leading from the library [Online]. http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/03/opinion/leading-from-the-library/skills-for-leading-libraries-of-the-future-leading-from-the-library/ [accessed 29 February 2016].

Chow, A. & Rich, M. (2013). The ideal qualities and tasks for library leaders [Online]. https://journals.tdl.org/llm/index.php/llm/article/viewFile/6380/6220 [accessed 29 February 2016]

Brey-Casiano, C. Leadership qualities for future library leaders: Carol's 10 steps to being a great library leader [Online]. http://www.library.illinois.edu/mortenson/book/10_brey-cassiano.pdf [accessed 29 February 2016]

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LIBER Leadership Development Programme

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At my library I am in charge of external partnerships including internationalisation. Some time ago we organised a workshop to come up with some great ideas for new services, but there were no suggestions. At one point I asked the crowd of fifteen or so: 'How many of you guys have visited a fellow university library or gone to a conference abroad in the last year?' The answer was an abysmal four. 'The year before?' Don't even ask.

We're pretty good at going local – which of course isn't enough in an increasingly global world.

Why the LIBER Leadership Development Programme?
There are several reasons. A lot of the challenges in the library and university sectors are pretty much the same all over Europe. How do we become more professional from a leadership standpoint? How do we deal with innovation and decreasing budgets? What about Big Data, Business Intelligence, facilitating learning? The list goes on and on.

The LIBER Leadership Development Programme provides a glimpse into all that – and much more. You meet colleagues – fellow leaders – who struggle with the same leadership issues as you do, and sometimes come up with amazing solutions.

Besides the fact that you are able to build a network with good colleagues from all over Europe, the Programme includes a placement with a senior library manager. I spent a week with Jan Wilkinson and her staff at the University of Manchester Library, and in addition to being generously invited into the engine room of an internationally renowned library, the opportunity to watch leadership 'live' as it happens, and discussing it afterwards over a drink, is a learning experience you don't get every day.

Consistent strategic communication and development of a leadership team were key takeaways. At the end of the Programme I had a dozen or so ideas and reflections, some of which I am currently working on. So, yes, it really does pay to get out of the office.

Future Leaders Programme

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Reflections can be a learning in themselves – thus I welcome this opportunity to share what the Future Leaders programme meant to me. My initial thoughts are that Future Leaders 5 [FLP5] was an engaging, enriching and one of the most enabling programmes that I have taken in my career. The programme had all the modules of any leadership course: exploring the self, team, and

Snapshots from participants in formal leadership development programmes

the organisation. I had taken some leadership programmes before this and my expectations were that this would be similar only longer . While the formal part of the programme was over a year, it is a lifetime programme in reality. You never stop learning from it. The Action Learning Team that I was part of in FLP5 was particularly helpful. In this small group of people you were able to tease out what was going on for you, what was at stake and what would help you going forward. This was all done in a supportive, trusted, confidential environment. The essence of this kind of support was to enable you to be truthful, honest and with the help of gentle coaching from your friends (they did become friends) you came to new breakthroughs in whatever issue you had. This was also practical, as you committed to an action. Awareness of all your core values and noticing when situations are aligned to them is when you work best. These situations give you a steady foundation that enables you to get to know and lead your own teams. The skills are transferrable and adaptable to any environment. I am extremely honoured to have met such incredible facilitators and co-participants at FLP5.

LIBER Leadership Development Programme

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Invest and earn

I am participating in the LIBER Leadership Development Programme during 2015–16. When you embark on training, you do not know beforehand how much it will give you. Of course it is also a question of your own attitude; you learn if you want to learn. What has always been a challenge for me is to use what I have learnt and to incorporate it into my daily work. The LIBER Leadership Development Programme is constructed so that it makes you learn, but you need to fully commit yourself to it. The more you invest the more you earn.

I gained practical pieces of advice to use in my daily work based on different management theories and practices, which were rehearsed throughout the course.

Powerful questions help me when reflecting on what I have done or planned and what I could do. The Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) helps me, as it gives me different ways of approaching others. Participating in the leadership development programme has also given me a network of European library professionals with whom I can consult, share ideas, have feed forward on any problems. My network is a spring of inspiration, a 'warehouse' of knowledge, providing me with huge opportunities to learn.

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LIBER Leadership Development Programme

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I joined the LIBER Leadership Development (Emerging Leaders International Development) Programme in 2011, two years into my role at the University of Manchester Library as a manager in its digital library team. My background is in IT and information management outside higher education and I was keen to improve my understanding of the strategic issues and leadership challenges facing university libraries, as well as developing my own leadership skills.

The programme was very challenging and there were numerous aspects of it that were interesting, enjoyable and beneficial. The module on change management looked at Kotter's eight-step change model and considered its applicability to our own environments. I've subsequently managed a number of programmes and projects that have brought about significant change and I have used the model on a number of occasions to inform my approach. The section on strategy taught us the art of time travel (mental rather than physical!), projecting ourselves to a point in the future and looking back to understand the journey we had gone through to get there. Again, this is an approach I've used on a number of occasions to try to get a clear vision of where we want to head and how we might get there.

The mentorship placement is a key part of the programme and one I benefited hugely from. I spent a week in Denmark, primarily with Svend Larsen, Chief Executive of the Statsbibliotek in Aarhus and also at the Royal Library in Copenhagen. Svend gave up a lot of his time to share his leadership experiences and approaches. A number of aspects of his approach have stayed with me and I now apply them myself. Contacts made at the Royal Library have been invaluable and I have subsequently worked closely with colleagues there on Library IT projects.

As part of the programme I joined an action learning set along with colleagues from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. We met virtually each month during the programme and continued afterwards. Having colleagues at similar stages of their careers and facing similar organisational and professional challenges, with whom you can be open and from whom you can learn from is immensely beneficial.

In 2015 I joined the library's Leadership Team and am now leading a significant programme for the library called Digital First. The LIBER programme enhanced my self-awareness, skills, tools, knowledge, profile and network to help me achieve this.

Snapshots from participants in formal leadership development programmes

CILIP Leadership Programme

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'Business can be understood as asset of relationships among groups which have a stake in the activities that make up the business' (Freeman, 2010 p. 24).

Knowing who your stakeholders are, and the power and influence they exercise within an organisation, is the key to understanding how decisions are made. This applies to whether you are working as part of a team or you are in a solo role at work. Regularly checking the stakeholder level of interest in your project or new service can help you direct your efforts to maximise the impact of your work. The series of videos focusing on the Stakeholder Analysis Theory is one of a number of resources made freely available to those who enrolled on the CILIP Leadership Programme.

I have found the leadership resources available from the CILIP VLE an invaluable source of support, and they have helped me to engage actively with the programme. The short and practical nature of the video materials have been a useful 'temperature check' to ensure that I am ready to handle the next challenge coming my way. Whether it's leading a project to develop a suite of online tutorials, to support student learning, or negotiating with programme managers a detailed review of current journal subscriptions.

When it comes to working with the CPD Project as part of the Leadership Programme, I found the Learning Resources about the Belbin 'Team Role Theory' very helpful. The central message was that for teams to be at their most effective, they are a balanced mix of varied skills, knowledge and attributes, not – what some people may expect – made up of the best subject expertise available.

Some of the key advantages of using this approach is that it improves an awareness of individual behaviour and the effects that this can have upon the team. It can develop trust from the rest of the team because they know how to respond to the other members involved, and it matches workers to the jobs that they will carry out the most effectively.

The excellent way the learning resources materials were provided included links to additional resources, when I needed to follow these ideas up. How can someone who fits the description of a 'plant', who is creative with ideas, work in the same team as a 'completer finisher' with their detailed approach? The CPD Project Team drew on the strengths of the individuals involved to collaborate effectively at a distance during the programme.

Freeman, R.E. et al. (2010). Stakeholder theory, Cambridge University Press. 2010

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Future Leaders Programme

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The training I undertook had a profound effect on me – from the moment the opportunity was offered to me, to a conversation I had this very morning (and regardless of which morning you read these words, gentle reader, it will still be true). The effect can be summarised in two words – confidence and communication.

Confidence is the almost inevitable impact of engaging in theorising and thought and the concomitant development of skills; in my case not just confidence that I could take on the advanced role, as it then existed, but that I would be bringing to it something unique and valuable. By introducing me to impressive individuals, mostly women (another significant experience), all with different approaches to management and leadership, the training course I undertook some years ago impressed on me the fact that the most effective leadership is not added onto but is a function of one's own unique (-ish) way of dealing with the world.

Without going into too much detail about the particular course* it is necessary to understand something of its structure to appreciate its stronger points. Apart from pretty heavy-duty reading lists, 'talks from leaders', 360 degree reviews and lots of admittedly fairly cheesy 'leadership-speak', there was the fact that the group which was brought into being by this year-long course became quite close. Each person became committed to helping the others to work through a particular leadership issue with which he or she was struggling. This built up an atmosphere of trust in which it was not difficult to ask for and offer help, and I became very conscious of the need to communicate extremely carefully (disclosure – my traditional communication style could best be characterised as 'scattergun'). My 'aha' moment in this regard came when I was paired in an exercise with a colleague whose personality and leadership style were completely opposite to my own. For that person to derive any benefit from our conversation I had to listen more actively and speak more carefully than I had ever done before. I wish I could say I always remember to commit this level of care to my professional communications, but at the very least I notice when I have failed to do so, when the result is always a much longer conversation than it needed to have been.

*see Fallon, Helen et al, 'Engaging with leadership development in Irish academic libraries: some reflections of the Future Leaders Programme (FLP)', in Australian library journal, 60 (1), pp. 8–20. ISSN 0004-9670. http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/2477/

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Future Leaders Programme

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Looking back, one of the most lasting impacts of the Future Leaders Programme that I completed in 2010 occurred for me on the first day of the first module, when one of the first slides stated 'every one of you is already a leader'. This simple statement and the subsequent year-long programme prompted a dramatic change in my outlook that has stayed with me. Before embarking on the course I saw myself as a reasonably competent and effective manager – it hadn't occurred to me to think of myself as a leader. I thought I was attending a course to learn how to become a leader or to learn from real leaders. The course fundamentally changed my understanding of 'leadership' as it took me through the language and skills of leadership – namely, vision, values, leadership strengths and weaknesses, my understanding of and impact on others, my understanding of my institution and the higher education environment in which I operate.

I now see everything through a leadership lens – myself, others, in work and outside it. I continually reflect on my own leadership style – what holds me back, what spurs me on, when I stay in my comfort zone and when I need to step out of it. I notice examples of strong and weak leadership in all areas of life. I see leadership skills and potential in my colleagues, my friends and even my children (all of whom are under the age of six!). I recognise the very rare leaders who seem to be naturally born, and the majority who have accepted the responsibility and have learned the skill of leadership, among whom I include myself.

Thinking of myself in leadership terms has many times strengthened my resolve when faced with workplace challenges that I might instinctively wish to avoid. Reflecting on what others need from me as a leader has often driven me to inspire and motivate, and also to do what all leaders must inevitably do – that which is unpleasant but is necessary for the greater good. In short, understanding my leadership role gives me confidence and conviction every day.

I wish that all librarians had the opportunity of experiencing a leadership development programme, but for those who don't, I would say this – you are already a leader – a representative, ambassador and champion of your library and your institution. What kind of leader are you?

Future Leaders Programme

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In 2008–09, I did The *Future Leaders Programme: Preparing for Service Leadership*, run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

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(http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/). This was a wonderful opportunity afforded to me by the library at Maynooth University for which I'm eternally grateful.

The theme and discipline of self-awareness as a critical component of effective leadership was my key learning takeaway, and one that I continue to work on.

My natural inclination is to be task-orientated, but through this programme I learnt to balance my orientation more towards people through better self-awareness. Thus I have learnt to listen more, to have more empathy and to understand, or at the very least seek to understand, the dynamics at play and respond accordingly. I also regularly challenge my thoughts and actions and continually strive to notice the blind spots. Reflection, change and renewal were further enabled by having the opportunity to experience different roles at the library. After the programme I read *Micromessaging: why great leadership is beyond words* by Stephen Young (2007, NY: McGraw-Hill), which I also found very helpful.

In terms of career progression, I eventually came to the conclusion that I was happy with where I was in my career at that time in my personal life. So while I haven't progressed my career in the traditional sense, I myself have progressed hugely, I feel, in how I practise leadership. Having said that, I'm acutely aware that I still have loads to learn and have lots of scope for developing other leadership traits.

My current leadership conundrum is a quotation from Martin Luther King that I read recently: 'A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.' All comments welcome!

Future Leaders Programme

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What is leadership? Leadership is a characteristic that we recognise innately and yet it has an undeniable intangibility. One might say that we know leadership when we experience it. In practice, effective leadership can be a challenging skill for senior managers to deliver consistently.

When we follow a leader, what mobilises us into action? It is not simply a question of convincing the head, making an objective argument and devising the strategy. It is also about convincing the heart and awakening the spirit of an organisation, which is of course a more complex matter, and asks for a personal investment by all parties. That is why leadership can prove difficult and even elusive to the best intentioned.

For me personally, the concept of a continuum of learning is at the core of leadership. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity on two occasions to complete formal leadership programmes, once as part of the 2008–9 cohort of librarians and IT managers to the Leadership Foundation Programme for Higher Education (http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/), and more recently as part of a senior management leadership programme at University College Cork. I benefited equally from each programme. They were somewhat different in scope and detail, but more importantly, they were very similar in delivery and structure. Both were led by excellent co-ordinators who provided a very high degree of intelligent, challenging and targeted support. They also adopted

Snapshots from participants in formal leadership development programmes

a three-part progressive structure, taking candidates through an intensely reflective examination of the self, relationships with others and, finally, personal contribution to their wider organisations.

This progressive structure provided in my opinion the foundation to enable me to take my leadership learning another step forward. Through a process of personal reflection and practical application, I was compelled and encouraged to tap deeply into my personal store of resilience and persist with the challenges of the programme. This is where the real value in leadership programmes lies. They must provide adequate time and opportunity, with an equal measure of challenge, to generate transformation. Despite my perception of my own progress seeming to gain me little ground, by persisting – and it is essential to persist – the lessons learned in resilience have provided me with the tools to confront and lead successfully through difficult situations in my own organisation.

Leadership programmes and their co-ordinators cannot make leaders. They can only provide the opportunity for candidates to achieve the personal transformation and continual learning necessary to lead. As senior managers we may have a sense or belief that we are already adequately carrying out a leadership role within our organisation, and that is where the greatest difficulty arises. Through a reluctance to truly self-examine and courageously complete the challenge of critiquing ourselves, we deprive our colleagues and employer of one of our primary respsonsibilities.

Leadership is never an easy journey, so appreciate it when you see it in action, wherever it comes from. It is an immensely rewarding skill to possess. It is the leader's role to not only see an objective through from start to finish, but to mobilise the ordinary and make it extraordinary. That may seem an unrealistic expectation in the average work place – I disagree. The extraordinary is never unrealistic. The small steps that deliver incremental change will become the giant strides that transform individuals, people and, in time, an organisation. The opportunities I have had to develop my leadership skills and assume leadership in my organisation have undoubtedly been my most rewarding work experiences – thanks to the opportunity Leadership Programmes have provided me, and to the support of my co-candidates, colleagues and programme co-ordinators.

LIBER Leadership Development Programme

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For me, leadership has three aspects: strategy development, decision making and people management. And not just for me – in any training in leadership you will find these elements. The LIBER Leadership Development Programme is, however, more than just another leadership training programme. It has a clear focus on these elements; in addition, all the training and exercises work from the context of my daily professional environment, the academic library. Everything I learn is therefore immediately applicable from day one.

The training gave me a European network of colleagues who are in the same phase of their professional career. This is a chance to relate my new experiences to peers. In addition, new insights on leadership emerge because of the mix of participants from all over Europe, with our slight social and

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cultural differences. I did my mentorship in Sweden, in the Library of the Technical University of Luleå. Under the impression that in Sweden much of the decision making is based on a consensus system, I asked myself whether consensus could speed up the implementation of decisions. In my own library we (the MT) tend to take decisions even when there is still some hesitation in the organisation. Some decisions are revisited during implementation, maybe because not everyone feels they were involved. What I found in Sweden was not consensus, but an interesting mix of communication, leader-based decisions, people-oriented leadership and trust. The mix really helps the library move forward. I use elements of this mix, and adjust them to my own situation and social environment.

I still have another four months to go in the LIBER programme, but I can already say that it has developed me. Last year I started a new team, and I used the ideas of the excellent book on team management to engage the new team to the full (*The five dysfunctions of a team*, by Patrick Lencioni). The team started off inspired and energetic. This year I have become the chair of the National Working Group on Involvement of Universities and their Libraries in Research Data Management. In this role I can apply people management since I am forming a new team, I am working on new strategies for academic libraries, and as chairperson I manage the decision making process.

With the LIBER programme I take a more conscious and dedicated approach.

Lencioni. P (2002). The five dysfunctions of a team. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass

CILIP Leadership Programme
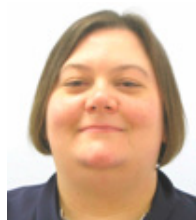
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I was a little nervous when signing up to the CILIP Leadership Programme as I was lacking in confidence and expected to be intimidated by the experience of the other participants. Happily, this hasn't been the case at all and the programme has really helped me to improve my confidence. I felt that I had something worthwhile to contribute to discussions and have actually found that others have the same concerns as me in terms of leadership. This might sound trivial but it has been immensely reassuring and given me a new perspective on certain problems and situations. The most direct impact of this confidence boost was that it led to a new (permanent) role for me. My new job is something I might not have had the faith in myself to go for a few years ago and represents a huge step up in my career. The role calls for co-ordinating the training needs across Cambridge's many libraries – something that requires strong leadership skills. I am very grateful that the Leadership Programme has given me confidence in my decisions as I move forward.

One area of leadership theory I have used in the last year is the role of individuals in teams. My previous job involved managing a diverse and well-established team, which was something not without its challenges. Developing a better understanding of team dynamics allowed me to make the best decisions for everyone involved and smoothed over what could have been a rough transition. When I moved on to my new job this understanding of teams again came in handy as I was able to adapt to a new way of working. Having knowledge of the structure of a team is a vital skill, no matter what your role within one, and this is one of the most valuable things I shall take away from the programme.

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LIBER Leadership Development Programme

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If developing your potential to lead academic library services is important to you, then read on. The intensive one-year LIBER Leadership Development (Emerging Leaders) Programme enables you to explore and enhance your skills with colleagues in a supportive environment. Put down your assumptions and pre-conceptions about your skill-set and performance as you begin. You examine what you already perform well, where your gaps are, and what you need to improve, receiving feedback all the way. From the initial seminar, you learn from your colleagues, tutors and invited speakers. The year-long action learning set with like-minded colleagues keeps your focus on individual learning targets and reminds you of the challenges you have set yourself. You spend a working week at your mentor's library – in my case, with Wilhelm Widmark and his colleagues at Stockholm University Library – which is a remarkable opportunity to learn, observe and reflect on your professional practice and expertise.

I was accepted onto the programme not long after I took up the post of Assistant Director (Research Library Services) at SOAS, University of London, ideally placed to learn and grow in this new role. Of the many leadership tools and techniques participants explored together at the initial seminar in London in June 2015, one of the most useful has been formulating and using powerful questions. This means that I analyse a situation or issue by asking myself or others a series of open questions framed to understand the essentials. The results are effective, insightful and empowering and, with practice, by using this technique I have become intuitive in facilitating decision-making.

On this programme, you study, ask yourself difficult questions, absorb and practise new ideas, contribute to a network of European colleagues and, above all, enjoy learning. If you are ready to invest so that you and your institution benefit from your leadership, this programme delivers.