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SLA: The importance of leadership

Special Libraries Association: The Importance of Leadership

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Abstract

The Special Libraries Association (SLA), celebrating its 100th year in 2009, has long considered leadership qualities to be an important characteristic of members of the association. This paper describes the structure of the organization and types of leadership programs available to SLA members and reviews some of the research done on the individual potential leadership characteristics of librarians and on special librarians in particular. A brief summary of the current activities of SLA and its positioning for the future are also provided.

SLA: The importance of leadership

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) was formed in 1909 by a group of librarians working in smaller and more specialized settings than the typical library, such as an insurance company library or the business reference collection in a larger public library. The librarians realized that although their libraries were very different from one another there were enough commonalities to benefit banding together in some way. Their original purpose was, as stated in the first issue of *Special Libraries*, was to “unite in co-operation all small libraries throughout the country; financial, commercial, scientific, industrial; and special departments of state, college and general libraries; and, in fact, all libraries devoted to special purposes and serving a limited clientele.” (Anon., 1909, p.1)

The development of special libraries in the 20th century signified an important change in the purpose of libraries. Until then libraries were mostly collections of printed materials. As Dana (1914, p.73) described it when proclaiming The New Library Creed: “*Select the best books, list them elaborately, save them forever—was the sum of the librarians’ creed of yesterday. Tomorrow it must be, select a few of the best books and keep them, as before, but also, select from the vast flood of print the things your constituency will find helpful, make them available with a minimum of expense, and discard them as soon as their usefulness is past.*” (Dana, 1914, p. 73, emphasis in the original).

From the beginning, leadership qualities were considered of the utmost importance, both from within the organization and looking outward. The association is comprised of local, geographically-based chapters and association-wide subject-oriented divisions. The day-to-day

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workings of the chapters and divisions of SLA have, not surprisingly, depended on volunteers. Instead of just taking this for granted, SLA has provided leadership and management training for the officers of these units.

SLA Structure and Emphasis on Leadership

SLA has had an Annual Conference in June since the beginning, full of presentations, continuing education, and round table discussions—primarily programs for the subject-oriented divisions. In 1970 a Winter Meeting was added, focusing primarily on the management of the association and its chapters and divisions. In 1982, the Middle Management Institute was added to the agenda, increasing the awareness of the place of leadership and management skills. In 2004 the name was changed to the Leadership Summit emphasizing the importance of these skills. The Knowledge Executive Institute was offered in the 1990's. This was meant for more experienced and seasoned professionals (Bender, 1998, p. 201) and was offered at varying times during the year.

SLA considers leadership skills and practices to be important both within and for the advancement of SLA, and without for the advancement of the profession. Good leadership skills will enhance any librarian's individual career and the profession as a whole. Most special libraries reside within a larger organization and strong leaders will contribute to stronger positions of the library within the organizational power structure of the larger unit, as well as libraries in general.

Annual conferences have long had an overall theme. In 1998 (held in Indianapolis) it was Leadership, Performance, Excellence: Information Professionals In the Driver's Seat. Of note was the keynote speaker, Stan Davis, who, in following the theme of the conference “urged information professionals to: 1) to find leadership roles within or outside their organizations; 2) to strive for high performance and add quality to the information technology products now so readily available, but not always well managed or interpreted (if we don’t, Davis stressed that someone else will); and, 3) to strive for excellence in their performance. (Klampert, 1998). In 2003 at the closing general session, Madeleine Albright (then Secretary of State for President Clinton) pointed out that “similarities between both the information industry and government are influenced by globalization and fragmentation and warned that technology by itself is no substitute for leadership.” (DiMattia & Blumenstein, 2003, p.46). In 2006 “among the sessions that attracted the largest and most enthusiastic audiences were those that focused on leadership development, competitive intelligence,...” (DiMattia 2006, p.25). Each year at the SLA Annual Conference & INFO-EXPO, SLA's unit leaders gather on Sunday morning for the Leadership Development Institute for training, skill development, brainstorming, and idea exchange.

While the structure of the annual conference has changed little over the years, the structure of the winter meeting (now the Leadership Summit) has undergone many changes, reflecting different approaches to developing leadership skills. Yet the content hasn’t changed much. In 2006, for example, as in most years, there were programs that focused on leadership skills for SLA officers and development of leadership skills and how to deal with and change within the workplace. (Ojala, 2006). Many of these programs are also available online from SLA for those unable to attend in person.

SLA Leadership Awards

In addition to the conferences, SLA has developed some leadership awards. In 1995, the Diversity Leadership Development Program was instituted. Its purpose is: “ To help accelerate the advancement and visibility of members who represent a diverse population of the Association by mentoring them for more leadership opportunities within the Special Libraries Association, to ensure that the Association remains vital, relevant, and representative of its diverse membership.” Each recipient receives US \$1000, complimentary registration to attend the annual conference, and an assigned mentor to assist candidates in understanding the mechanics of how the Association works and the roles of the Association leaders. Five people receive this award every year. There is also the Dow Jones Leadership Award, awarded to a member who exemplifies leadership as a special librarian through examples of personal and professional competencies. The recipient receives a cash award of US \$2000.

Leadership Characteristics of Special Librarians

An interesting question is whether there is anything that differentiates special librarians from other types of librarians in terms of leadership potential. There have been a few studies investigating the characteristics of librarians in general, and a few focusing in on special librarians in particular.

In 1990 members of SLA were selected at random to participate in a study of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Brimsek & Leach, 1990). Despite many differences in types of work and institutions, commonalities did appear. Without going into great detail here, a few things relate to leadership qualities in special librarians. In comparison with other studies on librarians in general, among special librarians, the most common preference “reflects qualities of visionaries and architects of the future... They are the strategic planners and researchers...” (Brimsek & Leach 1990, p.333). A similar study of academic library directors in Virginia found that “three of the four most common profiles ... parallel the SLA data (Brimsek & Leach 1990, p.333). These contrast with other MBTI studies done of librarians in general. In relation to other occupations the SLA data show a similarity to “consultants, management consultants, computer specialists, systems researchers,... (Brimsek & Leach 1990, p.333). Thus some leadership qualities appear to be emphasized in special librarians, academic library directors, and certain other professions.

Another study compared values of special librarians to those of another study that looked at values of public librarians, library school faculty, and library school students (Yerkey, 1981). Respondents ranked 18 values. The top four for special librarians were self-respect, freedom, inner harmony, and wisdom. Only the library school students also ranked self-respect at the top; public librarians ranked wisdom as number one; library school faculty ranked freedom as the top value. “A picture emerges of special librarians as inner-directed, meditative individuals... They place less emphasis on comfort, pleasure, and social recognition...” (Yerkey, 1981, p.199). Values are important because they are the underpinnings of much of what we do and inform us

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“about the things which motivate librarians as an aid in supervision and leadership.” (Yerkey, 1981, p.200).

In 2008 Stankus investigated patterns of membership of academic science, engineering, and medical librarians in two organizations (Stankus, 2008). The two were the American Library Association/Association for College and Research Libraries Science and Technology Section (ALA/ACRL-STS) and the Special Libraries Association’s science, technology, and medical divisions (SLA STM). One might expect academic librarians no matter their subject area to be members of ALA/ACRL, yet significant numbers belong to SLA, either as their sole association or in addition to ALA/ACRL. Among the reasons proposed is the matter of service, which is an important part of how academic librarians are evaluated. SLA is a much smaller organization than ALA, so the opportunities are greater for significant service roles. In fact, at the local level, “30% of academic SLA STM members have served as chapter officers... with one-third of these office holders (10% of the total) ... Chapter Presidents.” (Stankus, 2008, p.204). At the division (national) level “17% served as chair, the highest position, 72 (15%) held other offices.” (Stankus, 2008, p.205). Careers of academic librarians are enhanced by service as leaders in professional organizations, and SLA members have an edge in opportunity.

SLA Today

SLA is an exciting organization to be in today. The wealth of material available for members to learn from has grown immensely in the last few years. The Innovation Laboratory, or the ‘Sandbox’ as it’s often called, is a place where members can go to play with new Web 2.0

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technologies, a place where you can experiment and learn. (Abram, 2008). One of the most valuable assets for SLA members is Click University. This is professional continuing education at its best. There are typical online courses and webinars (free for members), and three premium certificate programs: Competitive Intelligence, Copyright Management, and Knowledge Management. There is also a substantial online library, consisting of the ebrary collections of business administration and knowledge management, and execuBooks (executive book summaries of the best in business literature.)

Conclusion

SLA's current Vision is to be the global organization for innovative information professionals and their strategic partners. And one of its five core values is Leadership—Strengthening our roles as information leaders in our organizations and in our communities, including shaping information policy.

“We are seeing the emergence of an amazing, revitalized profession at one of the key points in world history. We get to bring fresh perspectives to one of the most challenging times in our history! We actually get to create, to invent and to innovate. We are tasked with a great responsibility for education, learning, research, invention, technology, commerce and trade.” (Abram, 2009, p.36).

We are in position to “take ownership of institutional knowledge and provide access to information, knowledge, and strategic learning captured across the organization ... It takes us

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beyond the information age into a leadership role in developing and sustaining the organizational knowledge culture.” (St. Clair, 2009, p.29).

The years of SLA’s existence has mirrored the 20th century as technologies and industries expanded and as the importance of both providing and taming information specific to these industries grew, so did SLA. And now in the 21st century SLA is repositioning itself to continue to lead librarians and libraries into the future.

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