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ENHANCING YOUR MANAGEMENT TEAM

PREPARING MID-LEVEL LEADERS FOR SUCCESS

A strong team of mid-level managers magnifies what an organization's senior leadership team can accomplish and helps build a bench of future leaders. However, many organizations, including libraries, struggle with this. People need to be prepared for leadership, as it requires a different skill set than technical proficiency in one's profession or discipline. To effectively develop the next generation of library leaders, organizations must invest in both formal and informal activities that cultivate leadership potential. While not all libraries have the staff or structure to build a large and skill-diverse mid-level management team, administrative leaders can provide unique opportunities for emerging leaders to succeed, thus making the entire team stronger.

The Importance of Developing Mid-Level Managers

Mid-level managers serve as the crucial link between senior leadership and frontline employees. They are often the "face of the library" to patrons as well. Their ability to translate strategic goals into actionable plans and inspire their teams can signifi-cantly impact an organization's success.

Developing strong mid-level managers benefits an organization by:

- Enhancing Organizational Effectiveness: A well-trained management team ensures smooth operations and effective communication across all levels.

- Building Leadership Pipelines: Preparing individuals for leadership roles helps create a sustainable leadership succession plan.
- Boosting Employee Engagement and Retention: Managers who are well-equipped with leadership skills foster a positive workplace culture and improve employee morale, providing meaningful experiences for the public.
- Driving Strategic Execution: Mid-level managers who understand and contribute to long-term strategies help align teams with the organization's vision.

Leadership versus Technical Proficiency

Many employees excel in their technical roles but may struggle when transitioning into leadership positions. In many libraries, employees are promoted based on seniority or skill in programming or collection development, but they receive minimal professional development. At Twinsburg Public Library (TPL), we identify and coach emerging leaders by building on their existing project management and people skills. After their training, all full-time librarians and some associates are added to the Supervisor-in-Charge list. Serving as the person in charge helps staff increase confidence and learn to think on their feet.

Continued leadership development requires a unique set of skills, including:

- Communication: The ability to clearly convey expectations, provide feedback, and motivate teams.
- Decision Making: Assessing situations, evaluating risks, and making informed choices.
- Emotional Intelligence: Understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others to build strong professional relationships.
- Strategic Thinking: Looking beyond daily tasks to align team efforts with broader organizational goals.
- Coaching and Mentorship: Supporting team members in their professional growth and development.

Since leadership development does not happen automatically, organizations must implement structured strategies to cultivate these skills.

Differentiating Competencies: What Managers Need to Know

The behavioral competencies that leaders must demonstrate differ from competencies that apply to all staff. The Ohio Library Council has developed a set of behavioral competencies for all library staff.

These include:

- Adaptability
- Leadership
- Advocacy
- Organizational Awareness
- Communication
- Patron Awareness
- Customer Service
- Personal Organization
- Delegation
- Problem Solving
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Safety and Security
- Ethics
- Staff Development
- Facilitation
- Strategic Planning
- Innovation
- Teamwork
- Intellectual Freedom

Of these, *Delegation, Facilitation, Innovation, Leadership, Staff Development*, and *Strategic Planning* apply to management positions.[1] Therefore, when you are planning your training specifically for managers, the focus should be on the competencies that pertain to them.

Preparing Future Leaders: Formal and Informal Development Activities

Leadership preparation should be intentional and multifaceted. A blend of formal training programs and informal development opportunities ensures that

emerging leaders gain the necessary experience and confidence before stepping into management roles.

Formal Leadership Development Activities

Organizations should establish structured programs that offer leadership training and skill-building opportunities, such as:

1. Leadership Training Workshops: At TPL, we run a monthly "Rising Star" meeting with future leaders and current middle management. They have the opportunity to ask questions and talk about issues they've handled on the floor. We also designate specific topics to discuss, such as challenges that occur when "leading from the middle" or the process of coaching an employee. Your state library and your state and regional library associations may offer budget-friendly workshops as well.
2. Mentorship Programs: Pair emerging leaders with experienced managers to provide guidance and practical insights.
3. Management Rotations: Provide employees with exposure to different departments and leadership roles. We ask leaders to cover the service desks in other departments, usually during team meetings. This gives them a well-rounded perspective when it comes to the library as a whole.
4. Executive Coaching: Offer personalized coaching to high-potential employees to refine leadership competencies. While this may not be affordable for all libraries, active leaders in an organization can provide coaching and tools for employees to upskill in this area. Again, your state library and your state and regional library associations may have resources to help with this. Some employee assistance programs (EAPs) provide this service as well.
5. Certification Programs: Our library funds continuing education workshops for all staff, and a local library support organization provides training for new leaders. All staff are encouraged to pursue certifications through the Ohio Library Council. OLC provides certifications for both librarians and non-degreed library workers.

Informal Leadership Development Activities

In addition to formal training, informal experiences play a vital role in shaping future leaders. Opportunities to build leadership capabilities should be embedded in everyday workplace activities, including:

- Developing Performance Appraisals: Having emerging leaders and supervisors engage in the evaluation process fosters analytical thinking and decision-making; it also helps them understand how performance feedback systems help the organization with talent management.
- Coaching for Better Performance: Providing constructive feedback to peers and subordinates enhances leadership confidence.
- Participating in Interviews: Being involved in hiring decisions helps individuals understand organizational needs and culture.
- Leading Team Meetings: Offering emerging leaders the chance to facilitate discussions and problem-solving sessions.
- Managing Small Projects: Assigning responsibility for initiatives builds confidence and accountability.
- Engaging in Cross-Departmental Collaboration: Encouraging employees to work with different teams broadens their perspective and fosters adaptability.
- Board and Civic Meetings: Emerging leaders should be encouraged to attend and participate actively in Board of Trustees meetings, as well as civic meetings such as City Council, Rotary, and others to gain experience and comfort interacting with more established professionals in the community.

Managers at TPL provide yearly feedback on changes to performance appraisals, which are then enacted by administration. They also engage in coaching and lead meetings and interviews. All librarians, middle managers, and managers at TPL are expected to take ownership of multiple projects and programs.

Administrators should also provide a strong example of what being a leader at the library looks

like, modeling the behavior they want to see.

By incorporating both formal and informal activities, organizations create a robust leadership development culture.

The Role of Informal Influence in Leadership Readiness

Leadership is not simply about holding a title or occupying a management position. True leadership is rooted in the ability to influence others—sometimes without any formal authority. That's why developing informal influence is a critical step in leadership readiness. Before individuals are promoted to formal supervisory or managerial roles, they should demonstrate their capacity to lead through the trust, respect, and credibility they've built across the organization. Informal influence is often what sets apart high-potential employees who are truly ready to take on greater responsibilities.

Informal influence refers to the ability to affect others' attitudes, behaviors, and decisions without relying on positional power. It is grounded in the way individuals consistently interact with colleagues, contribute to team success, and model the values of the organization. People with informal influence often emerge as go-to resources, trusted advisors, or even de facto leaders within their teams. They rally others around ideas, help resolve conflicts, and model the kind of behavior others want to emulate. When organizations recognize and nurture this kind of influence, they are investing in a stronger, more sustainable leadership pipeline.

There are several key ways employees can begin developing informal influence within their current roles:

- Being a Problem Solver: Individuals who take initiative to identify challenges and propose thoughtful, actionable solutions naturally position themselves as leaders. They look for ways to enhance efficiency, enhance effectiveness, or improve processes. They demonstrate critical thinking and a proactive mindset, qualities that are essential for any leadership role.
- Demonstrating Accountability: People who consistently meet deadlines, follow through on commitments, and take ownership of their work build trust. Their reliability makes them someone others can count on—an essential trait for anyone in a leadership position.
- Supporting Colleagues: Leadership is not about individual success; it's about helping others succeed too. Employees who foster collaboration, share credit, and offer help to peers contribute to a stronger team dynamic and are often viewed as informal leaders by their coworkers.
- Displaying Professionalism: Maintaining integrity, a positive attitude, and a strong work ethic—even under pressure—reflects maturity and emotional intelligence. These are the behavioral foundations of informal influence, earning respect from both peers and supervisors.
- Communicating Effectively: The ability to clearly express ideas, actively listen, and adapt communication style to different audiences is key to gaining influence. Employees who communicate well are more likely to build consensus, resolve misunderstandings, and motivate others.

By encouraging employees to build these behaviors into their daily work, organizations help cultivate future leaders who are not only competent but respected. Informal influence serves as a proving ground for leadership potential. It allows individuals to demonstrate their readiness to guide others, manage conflict, and lead change—skills that are indispensable when transitioning into formal roles. When the time comes for promotion, those with informal influence are often the ones who step into leadership roles most seamlessly because they've already earned the confidence of their peers and supervisors.

Mid-Level Management, Hybrid Workplaces, and Online Communication

The rise of hybrid work models has fundamentally reshaped the operational landscape of organizations, demanding a parallel evolution in the skills and competencies of those who lead teams[2]. While

public services staff rarely, if ever, work remotely, support staff may occasionally need to do so. TPL employs an English language learning specialist who offers classes online for patrons in need of flexibility. A writers' group and book club also meet on Zoom. New leaders should understand their libraries' policies and procedures regarding hybrid work and which staff are permitted to use these arrangements.

Administrators may also benefit from hybrid work arrangements, especially if they need time away from the library to complete performance reviews, communicate with the library board, and participate in community outreach. New leaders must bridge the gap between administration and front-line staff when it comes to these arrangements. Front-line staff are keenly aware that their work does not support as much flexibility, and this disconnect can impact morale. While administration should be transparent about their remote activities, middle managers often find themselves handling the "boots on the ground" work in the building, and they must be prepared to explain why administrators might not be present. It is the middle manager's job to provide operational leadership.

Many libraries have also chosen to implement virtual communication spaces such as Microsoft Teams. For newly appointed supervisors, navigating this complex environment requires a distinct skillset that goes beyond traditional management practices. They must be adept at fostering connection, ensuring equitable opportunities, and maintaining productivity across both physical and virtual realms.

Due to these shifts in the workplace, one of the most critical new skills for supervisors in a hybrid setting is advanced communication and virtual collaboration proficiency. New supervisors must learn to leverage a variety of digital tools effectively, from video conferencing platforms and instant messaging systems to project management software and collaborative documents. They need to master the art of clear and concise virtual communication, ensuring that information is disseminated equitably and that all team members feel informed and connected.

This includes developing skills in active listening in virtual settings, facilitating engaging online meetings, and utilizing asynchronous communication effectively to accommodate different work styles.

These communication tools are also used to collaborate with other libraries, vendors, and professional development meetings. They may also be used to communicate between branches of larger systems. Managers who lead across branches must avoid proximity bias; for example, if a manager is based in one branch, they may favor the staff they see every day.

It is important to create inclusive virtual meeting environments, proactively seeking input from remote or off-site team members, and establishing clear guidelines for communication and collaboration that respect diverse work preferences. While communication tools are helpful for keeping in constant contact, managers should also prioritize in-person time with their teams. Building a strong sense of team identity and shared purpose across different locations and areas of the building requires supervisors to foster a culture of trust and psychological safety.

Empathy and emotional intelligence take on heightened importance in managing teams online. The nuances of nonverbal communication can be easily missed in virtual interactions, making it crucial for supervisors to be attuned to the emotional well-being of their team members. Fortunately, collaborative spaces provide different opportunities for team-building. TPL's Microsoft Teams environment includes channels for staff to share pictures of their pets and compliments from patrons.

New styles of work in libraries offer dramatic potential for communication, collaboration, and flexibility. Many organizations simply implement new software and/or procedures without creating a strategy first. Middle management and administration should work together to identify their goals for both online communication within buildings and with those who work remotely.

Intrinsic Motivation is Key

For leadership development to be effective, managers must be intrinsically motivated—driven by a personal desire to grow, improve, and contribute meaningfully to their organization. While external structures such as training programs, mentorship, and performance systems are important, they can only do so much. Development cannot be imposed; it must be embraced by the individual. Managers who are motivated from within are more likely to seek feedback, reflect on their actions, and proactively apply new skills in real situations.

When managers lack this internal drive, organizational efforts to develop them often fall short. In these cases, pushing too hard can be counterproductive, diverting resources away from those who are ready to grow and potentially creating resentment or disengagement. Instead, organizations should focus on setting clear expectations and providing meaningful opportunities—but hold individuals accountable for their own engagement. If a manager consistently shows little interest in self-improvement, despite being given the tools and support, that must be addressed as a performance concern.

Leadership is not just about skill, it's also about mindset. A manager who is technically proficient but resistant to growth may pose a risk to team morale, collaboration, and long-term success. Therefore, organizations should invest in those with both capability and willingness to develop, while making it clear that openness to learning is a core requirement of the role. Supporting intrinsic motivation is key—but it must be paired with accountability for continuous improvement.

Implementing a Leadership Development Strategy

To successfully prepare mid-level managers, organizations must create a comprehensive leadership development strategy. Many of the techniques and ideas described above can be used in formulating this strategy, including:

1. Identifying High-Potential Employees
   - Use performance evaluations and feedback from supervisors to identify employees with leadership potential.
   - Look for individuals who demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and a willingness to learn.
   - Seek those who display intrinsic motivation and desire to lead.

2. Providing Growth Opportunities
   - Assign employees to cross-functional teams or high-visibility projects.
   - Offer shadowing experiences with senior leaders.

3. Encouraging Continuous Learning
   - Support employees in attending conferences, seminars, and professional development courses.
   - Provide access to leadership books, articles, and e-learning resources. These do not have to be limited to publications and webinars provided by library-specific organizations. Encourage staff to read across the spectrum of leadership examples from all industries and disciplines.
   - Train new leaders on the nuances of working in hybrid environments and collaborative online spaces.

4. Measuring Leadership Development Success
   - Track participation in training programs and leadership activities.
   - Gather feedback from employees about their development experiences.
   - Assess leadership readiness through 360-degree feedback and performance assessments. Consider patron feedback as well. Take note of any complaints or compliments regarding a staff member and build discussions about them into coaching. You should also have measurable data to analyze regarding the programs and projects that employee leads.

Building a strong management team requires more than just promoting high-performing employees. Leadership is a skill that must be cultivated

through intentional development efforts. By combining formal training programs, hands-on learning experiences, and opportunities for informal influence, libraries can successfully prepare mid-level managers for leadership roles. Investing in library leadership development not only strengthens the management team but also ensures long-term organizational success.

Developing effective mid-level managers requires more than just providing training or assigning responsibilities—it demands a culture that supports growth, encourages informal leadership, and expects personal accountability. The most successful leadership development efforts are rooted in a combination of structured learning, real-world experience, and, critically, the intrinsic motivation of the individual. Managers must be genuinely committed to their own development, open to feedback, and willing to stretch beyond their comfort zones. Without this internal drive, even the best-designed programs may fall short.

Organizations play a vital role by offering tools, modeling effective leadership, and creating an environment that values curiosity and continuous improvement. However, they should not overextend in pushing unmotivated managers to grow. Instead, they must balance support with accountability, setting clear expectations and holding managers responsible for their engagement and development. A technically capable manager who resists growth can hinder team performance and compromise long-term success.

By investing in those who are ready and willing to lead, organizations strengthen not just individual performance but the overall capacity of the management team. In today's evolving workplace, where adaptability, influence, and collaboration are essential, preparing intrinsically motivated leaders is not optional; it is foundational to sustained organizational effectiveness. **PL**

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