

Leadership: There is no other option

By Hilda K. Weisburg

Snapshot

Hilda K. Weisburg, a highly respected and long-standing US commentator, explores the practical and personal ways we can develop our leadership skills for the ultimate benefit of ourselves, our school community and our profession.

The biggest change I've seen since I began writing for school librarians in 1979 is not advances in technology but the awareness that administrators and legislators don't see school librarians and libraries as automatically belonging in every school. When librarians aren't leaders, their positions and programs become expendable. You must become a leader if you want to keep your job and if you want your school district to have librarians in the future.

For years, along with my former co-author Ruth Toor, I have been exhorting librarians to be leaders. The response from elementary school librarians often was, 'I have no time for that. Besides, we are part of the teachers' contracts.' The high school librarians were equally unmoved. They couldn't see how there could be a high school without a library. It's a short-sighted attitude. We were setting ourselves up for a cataclysmic change, and it hit about fifteen years ago.

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First a bit of history. In 1997, Gary Hartzell wrote a two-part article in *School Library Journal* entitled 'The Invisible Librarian: Why Other Educators Are Blind to Your Value.' We nodded and said, he's right. Unfortunately, we focused on the part that said educators were blind to our value—ignoring the 'Why'. Then came the 2008 Recession in the United States and elsewhere. School budgets were slashed, and school boards and administrators began a desperate search to find places to cut and/or eliminate costs. Thousands decided the librarian and the library were ripe for the chopping block.

Up until then, most people assumed a school included a library and at least one librarian. The new harsh realities upended that assumption. What was the librarian doing anyway? After all, we now had the Internet and kids were adept (so they thought) at online searching. Almost overnight, the number of librarians was drastically eliminated. Library budgets - if the library was kept—were reduced to almost nothing or nothing. Volunteers were given the run of the library, and librarians were in shock.

Fortunately, there were librarians who were leaders and others who took up the challenge and started demonstrating what we bring to students and the educational community. More than ten years later we are still not back to our old numbers, but every day I hear of more job openings. We can see some lights if not the end of the tunnel.

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Now we must look forward. Bemoaning the past or complaining about how unfair it all was changes nothing. Action does. It is time for all librarians to become leaders for our current programs and for new ones to be established. Those who are already leading need to lead on a larger level and those who haven't stepped into leadership need to start.

Barriers to leadership

Several years ago, I was the chair of AASL Advocacy and as part of my responsibilities I spoke to Affiliate Assembly. I was wearing a pin distributed at the conference with the message, 'Ask me how School Librarians Transform Learning?' I said to the delegates, 'I am sure each of you can respond if anyone asks you, but can every librarian

in your home state do the same?' In order to grow and thrive as a profession and be what our students and faculty need us to be, we all need to be leaders, prepared to speak up—and speak out- about what we do. We must be heard. We must be seen as leaders, indispensable to the educational community.

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What barriers have you created that are keeping you from taking your place as a recognized leader?

If you're not yet a leader, ask yourself: What is holding you back? What barriers have you created that are keeping you from taking your place as a recognized leader? No matter what you think, the majority of the barriers you come up with are created by you. And these barriers won't come down until you identify what they are and see the truth behind them. They are, in essence, a story you're telling yourself.

Librarians love stories. We read and share them with our students at every level from new reader to voracious reader. There's no harm in a good book. **But there is harm in the stories we tell ourselves.** When we believe these stories are true, it is to the detriment of our leadership. Because even if there is some truth to them, mostly these are fears we've come to use to keep us from stepping up. They become the biggest barrier to our becoming leaders.

Some of the most common stories are:

I don't have time

You know this one. It sounds like, 'I would love to be a leader, honestly, but I'm already so busy.' It's a story we tell ourselves for many choices we are faced with in our lives, but when you use it to explain why you aren't a leader it's the excuse you are using to hide.

I have no doubt you have a very demanding schedule. You may have more than one school to

cover. Your workday begins the moment you open the library doors, and it doesn't end until you close them. The demands on you are constant. When the workday is over, you have other obligations that keep you busy often until bed. You obviously have no time to lead. And of course, you have a point. Like all good fiction, this story has strong elements of truth.

The truth you aren't facing is that no one has time. We all live at full speed. You must **make** time, and the only way we ever make time is by deciding something is a priority. Think of any important goal you achieved. Did you actually have time for it before you made it a priority?

Probably not. Think of a time when you had to reorganize your life because of a new commitment. What did you do when one or more of your children became involved in a sport or the band, or the play, and needed you to take them to the school or pick them up – or both? You figured it out because it's a priority. You even manage to watch practices and games or see the play.

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The same is true with being leader. Once you realize there really is no option to becoming a leader (because without it your job and your program are at risk every budget year) you are ready to discard that story and take the steps necessary.

Do more to connect with teachers and others with greater focus.

Oddly enough, becoming a leader won't take much time in the beginning. Start by looking for new ways to showcase your current program and make it visible to your administrators and the community. Do more to connect with teachers and others with greater focus.

When you're ready to devote more time to leadership, you might take a small risk like starting a Makerspace program in your library or sending teachers a once-a-week email with a link to a web resource or app they can use with their students along with an offer to help them get comfortable with it and start using it. When you start volunteering at the state and national level, leading will take more time, but by then you will know that the returns you get outweigh whatever you have given up to make the commitment.

Leaders are born not made

Another story I hear is that some people are just born leaders. Then the person suggesting this says they just don't have that ability. Once again, there is an element of truth. You can walk into a pre-school or kindergarten class and spot the leaders. But this assumes leadership can't be learned, and it can be. It is my favorite story to disprove because I was not born a leader.

If you go to seminars or do team building workshops, you are likely to be asked the question 'Who Are You?' Today one of my first answers is 'I am a Leader', and it sometimes surprises me to realize that is exactly who I have become. In every area of my life, I lead, but if you knew me when I was young you would never believe this is where I'd end up.

In high school, I was an outsider and clueless. Every day was an adventure in stomach-turning fear, and I tried on a new personality regularly. None of it worked. College was a blissful interlude, but my first job was as a high school librarian (I had only 6 credits in librarianship tacked on to my teaching certificate so I could qualify as an emergency teacher librarian) but I was a disaster. Clueless again and I wasn't rehired. However, underneath not knowing what I was doing, I had found a job I loved and wanted to do well. My second job started out much better because I worked with a great librarian but the following year she left, and I got the boss from hell. I didn't last out the year. Obviously, I was destined to be a failure as a librarian.

I regrouped by working in a public library, took time out to have two kids, and when the youngest started school I was ready to return. I started in 1973 as an elementary librarian in a brand-new school modeled on the British Infant School. The district never had an elementary librarian so there was no program to work from. It was mine to create – and no, I wasn't brilliant at it—but the environment gave me room to experiment and learn.

The school was a learning community (although the term was not invented yet) as we all worked with each other to figure out how to do things in such a radically different environment. By its nature it was highly collaborative. I discovered the teachers were looking to me for my expertise, and without realizing it, I found my voice. I stepped out of my comfort zone and took my first steps to becoming a leader. I went back to school for more courses, met Ruth Toor, and we wrote our first book, *The Elementary School Librarian's Almanac*. We would be writing partners from 1976 until 2011. By becoming a published author, I moved more firmly into being a leader, but it wasn't an easy progression. There were few role models, and nothing written to suggest how vital it is for librarians to become leaders. Looking back, I can clearly see that the rookie librarian I was would never have thought herself a leader. It was something I learned and chose and now live and teach.

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I'm too much of an introvert to be a leader

Do you think you can't speak in front of large groups or join committees where there are so many people you don't know? Does the thought of talking to groups of teachers, parents or presenting something to the Board of Education get your heart hammering? And has this led you to think that stepping up isn't for you? It's a common fear, but once again, it's a story that's holding you back.

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Leadership does not require you to be an extrovert. Besides, your greatest asset as an introvert is in effectively speaking one-on-one with people, and that's where the best relationships start. In addition, introverts are generally good listeners and good at reading

people which support them as leaders. As an extrovert, I have had to work hard to practice active listening and lose the bad habit of framing my answer while someone is still talking.

After you're comfortable in your role as a building leader, you might speak to a parent-teacher organization at your school on staying safe in cyberspace or some other topic. You will be nervous since you will be moving out of your comfort zone, but you will be secure in your knowledge and eager to show parents how your program benefits their children. You'll get past your nerves. You might even do a presentation for your association's conference. Yes, it's a long way from where some of you are now, but once you take the first steps to leadership you never know where it will take you – or how much you might enjoy it.

Facing and overcoming fear

Fear is biggest roadblock to leadership, and it's underneath the stories we tell ourselves. It is tied to all the barriers I presented. So how do you deal with fear? Let's look at some examples.

You stepped out of your comfort zone and are on your first national level committee. Now that you are not in your home area, you don't know anyone on the committee. Everyone knows what they are doing but you, or so you think. In reality, there are likely other new members on the committee and current members ready to welcome you, glad for your assistance. The chair will help anytime you're uncertain about anything. In a short time, you will be comfortable and will be making friends across the country. Think of the Professional Learning Network you will gain!

Or the expected fear strikes when you finally do need to speak in public. How do you overcome the shaky voice and wobbly knees? There are loads of websites with advice on how to deal with it proof you are not alone in this fear. Some of my favorite tips are:

Know your audience - In preparing your talk, consider what your audience already knows. What else do they need to know about the topic? You neither want to overwhelm them with information above their heads nor do you want to talk down to them. Think about how you prepare a lesson for your students. You always know where they are and where you want to take them next. Start from where they are and take them to that next place.

Rehearse your speech - Don't worry about memorizing it. That's not necessary, and you'll panic if you forget a line. PowerPoint presentations help keep you on track. Use just enough text on your slides to keep you and your audience on track. I mostly use only a few words to highlight the point I am making. I also have notes for each slide, but I allow myself to digress and add comments that strike me in the moment.

Be personal - As appropriate, share your personal experiences. It's an extension of your relationship building. By letting them know who you are and what you've been through, they are more accepting of what you are saying and will see the parallels in their own journey. I often let my audiences know about my failures as well as my successes. This keeps me from seeming remote and different from them especially since it's the failures that taught me the most.

Arrive early – When planning your time, plan to arrive at the location and your presentation room early. You need time to breathe. Check the layout of the room. Make sure any equipment you need is set up and working – including internet connections. Greet those who are there. This means you won't be speaking to strangers when the time comes. They will be rooting for you.

About that shaky voice – Once you are past your opening, it will likely disappear. And your audience never knows you are that nervous. If necessary, have water nearby. Take a drink now and then. Ignore those who have taken out their phones and are checking messages. There are always a few like that. I have had people fall asleep. I remind myself it isn't me They have had a long day, the room is comfortable, and it just happens.

The imposter syndrome – To keep your fears at bay, be watchful for the Imposter Syndrome. This is mental chatter that keeps us from stepping out of our comfort zones and believing we can be and are leaders. Imposter syndrome is a widespread ailment. It affects some of the most successful people in almost every profession. Both men and women suffer from it at various times, although studies show women are more prone to it.

Here's another scenario: You have taken the plunge and submitted a proposal to do a presentation at your state conference based on a highly successful collaborative unit you developed, and your proposal was accepted. You are ecstatic.

Then the imposter syndrome hits.

It usually starts with phrases like, 'Who am I to...' or 'Why did I think that....' You begin second guessing yourself. This is more than being nervous before speaking to a large group. The voices inside your head are saying you are not up to this challenge. You've seen great presentations your colleagues have given, and you know you are not that good. Whatever made you think anyone would find your topic worthwhile? Everyone has done something like it. You are not that special.

Imposter syndrome can strike even after you have given successful presentations and even after you see yourself as a leader. You ascribe your success to having been lucky in who attended, or your time slot, or whatever. Anything that attributes your success to something besides yourself.

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This also happens when we think we see what others do that we cannot. Maybe you are using Twitter, but you see so many librarians are leading Twitter chats and showing all they accomplish. Or you read a post on Facebook about someone doing a great unit with their students using an app or resource you never heard of. How can you think you are a tech integrator when you don't know how to do these things? We don't see the things we do that others are not doing. We assume everyone is doing **THAT**, so our accomplishments matter less.

Even if you're in the early stage of your leadership journey, it doesn't mean you have nothing to offer to others. There are plenty of librarians who have not reached the place you are. You have something to contribute and other librarians at your level need to see what is attainable to them. Yes, we learn from the people at the finish line, but we learn just as much – if not more – from the people on the journey with us.

These negative thoughts will spiral through your head most every time you step out of your comfort zone until you recognize the Imposter Syndrome for what it is – another story where you can change the ending.

Developing more leadership qualities

Confidence is a grounding leadership quality. It makes it easier to take risks, speak before groups, ask for help, and develop a vision. You undoubtedly feel confident in many aspects of your personal life and you may be confident in how you do your job, but once you consider leadership,

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some of that confidence erodes. So how can you build your confidence? Sometimes the easiest course of action is to 'Fake It Until You Make it.' Here are some ways to build your confidence while you're still in the process of growing.

Dress for success

When you think you look good, it boosts your self-confidence and you walk and talk differently. Look around your building. Notice how the teachers dress. Is there a difference between those who are well-regarded and others? There are always exceptions, but in general this holds true.

Compare that with what you wear. Where are you on the scale? If you look like some of the less-regarded teachers, you are opening yourself up to being ignored or not valued highly. If your clothes are similar to teachers who are highly regarded you are in a better position.

You can take that up one notch as you want to be viewed as a leader. Increasingly you will be in the presence of administrators. If you look as though you are one of them, you will be treated as though you are. It may seem superficial, but it's effective. How we see ourselves and how we are seen by others makes a difference in our success.

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Be an optimist

A good leader needs a positive outlook. Negative people are not pleasant to be around. This doesn't mean being a Pollyanna who believes life is wonderful no matter what happens. It's

being a person who doesn't focus or dwell on the negatives but deals with them by seeing them as 'choppportunities' (a term I learned from a *School Library Journal Summit*) -- challenges that can be turned into an opportunity. When Common Core began in America, librarians felt totally left out, but some looked for, and discovered, ways to leverage their expertise into helping teachers become successful with it. It resulted in more library use for research projects and lots more collaborations. That's a 'choppportunity.'

Change your mindset

To become more optimistic, notice and adjust your mindset. How you think conditions how you feel and that affects your body language and your voice. It changes the way you listen and the ways you are heard. Look for ways to stay positive on and outside the job. For me, maintaining a Gratitude Journal does this. For others, affirmations or meditation works. Staying positive can be a huge gift to the people you work with and your program.

Expand your professional knowledge base

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Stay current with trends in library AND education, even business if that interests you. If you know the buzz words and see how your program supports the concepts, you will be better able to speak about it. Becoming active in your professional associations, going beyond your local ones, increases your knowledge base and adds fluency to your conversations about the role of the school library in the educational community.

Keep an eye on what is new in technology. Always consider how it may affect education and school libraries. If you are really enterprising, look at articles on leadership from the business world. Frequently they are early adopters or on the cutting edge of trends which, if successful, will find their way to your library. Their lessons can often be applied to school librarians.

We are all working to find ways to deal with the upheaval COVID-19 has created. It's hard to focus on being a leader right now, but your students and teachers need help. Help that you can best provide. Take time for yourself, but then draw on your PLN and your skills and curate the resources they need. Show them what a school librarian does.

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Look at your barriers and fears, notice where your stories are getting in your way. Make being a leader a priority and be prepared to step out of your comfort zone. Let your inner leader come out. Your students and your teachers need it.

Hilda K. Weisburg was a school librarian for over 30 years and is now an author, speaker, and adjunct instructor at William Paterson University (NJ). She coauthored 14 books for school librarians (with Ruth Toor), including *Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Option*, *Being Indispensable: A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader*, *New on the Job: A School Library Media Specialist's Guide to Success*, and *School Librarian's Career Planner*, which was her first work without Toor, all published by ALA Editions. Her newest book, *Classroom Management for School Librarians* will be coming out shortly. For 35 years she cowrote and edited *School Librarian's Workshop*, a bimonthly newsletter for K-12 librarians. She has given presentations, and keynotes at ALA, AASL, and state library conferences and given staff development workshops in many locations. A past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, she has served on many ALSa and AASL committees, chairs The Ruth Toor Grant for Strong Public Libraries, and serves on the ALA Professional Ethics Committee. Her YA fantasy novel *Woven through Time* was a finalist in the International Book Award in the Fiction/Fantasy category. Hilda was the recipient of the 2016 AASL Distinguished Service Award.