

Leadership in Prairie Dog Town

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My experience at the PNLA Leadership Institute 2008 was more unique than I expected. I became quite ill while there and lost the use of my voice for the majority of the institute. I had to use more than my voice to accomplish the leadership tasks set before me. The good news is that I was able to use my body language and my tiny, squeaky voice to communicate with my team and other participants. I also had the opportunity to not speak and to observe. It was a challenge for me to envision how to accomplish a group skit or how to communicate my thoughts about the vision statement without my voice. I also learned some things about myself that I hadn't intended.



(the Seeking Circle)

My main workgroup, The Seeking Circle, was composed of eight participants and two mentors, all of whom amazed me in their diversity and experience. We all had different starting places in leadership and different goals for our careers and futures. For the most part, we were a quiet and respectful group; so much so that at times, even without my voice, I felt that I was the talkative one. As I look back at our learning objectives, it seems that what we all had in common (and probably still have in common) is the desire to lead in the best possible way, to empower others, to take risks, and to build partnerships. We were a small town on a prairie with three other towns.

My main goal when I came to Leads was to step outside of my comfort zone and conquer my fears as a leader. I have struggled with fear and doubt all my life and Leads was no exception. My largest doubt was that others were better leaders than I. Leads challenged this assumption for me because I learned that even though others have different styles of leadership, it isn't always a better leadership and in some cases it is worse than what I would have done. I found that my leadership style is to support a good leader, but that if no leader presents themselves I will step into the gap and lead. I also realized that an ineffective leader is better than no leader at all, but if an effective leader leads, there is a greater chance for success.



(my support group)

I envision myself in a prairie dog town at Leads. Some of us were standing up, watching for opportunity and threats, and looking around at the larger picture ready to shout the news, while others were keeping heads low and doing tasks. Our facilitators, Becky and John, challenged us to test our leadership skills, to see what worked and what didn't work within the group. We were advised to look beyond the group functioning well and to work on our own leadership skills. I found myself standing up and leading a lot (which I internally read as leading to much) so I switched my tack and kept my head down to allow others to lead. I was struggling to find a balance between sharing and selfishness. I wanted to be fair but felt that if no one stepped in to lead, we would be lost. I stood up, I put my head down, I looked around and I worked. I realized that I was struggling not only with leadership issues but my fears as well.

When the opportunity to represent my group in the formation of the institute's vision statement arose I disregarded my fears and volunteered. Then, an hour or so later, I felt guilty because a good leader would have allowed others the opportunity –right? Was it good leadership to have taken the opportunity myself? I struggled with this decision quite a bit over the rest of the week, even though my fellow visioners and I crafted a motivational and moving vision statement. I still wonder if I was the best representative of my group for that task but I also learned that the past is only a means for evaluating the future and not something to hold onto whether it is failure or success.

I am very proud to have been part of the vision statement group. We worked together very efficiently, accomplishing our goal in what appeared to be record time. Or at least that was the impression we got when we reported our completion of the statement to the facilitators. It seems to me that our secret was that each of us used

a specific leadership ability to keep the team on task. We had one person dedicated to the motivational power the statement required, one was dedicated to the organization of the statement by keeping all of our notes in place for editing and the final product, one was dedicated to the inclusion of the essence of all the ideas generated in the vision exercises of the combined teams, while another was dedicated to keeping the group focused and on task. Each of us assumed all of these roles at some point but it was the strengths of the four individuals combined that wrought such excellence. I refer to our group as the Visioneers, because we were engineering a vision that was a secret project to benefit the entire group. All of us were a bit nervous as we stood before the group to present the statement. As Kristin read our vision statement aloud with such distinction and pride, I was swept up with the thoughts and ideas behind the vision, the desire to lead into the future, and to be my best self. We were successful in our efforts—the group gave us a standing ovation. Ironically, the next morning, the last day of the institute, I recovered my voice.



(The Visioneers)

I find myself very much the prairie dog in my day-to-day work at my small branch library. There is so much to do and so I keep my head down to accomplish the work. I find myself periodically standing up, looking around me, looking to the future and reading the instate vision statement. I make strides toward the future, I move a stone or two but then I get back to the tasks at hand. At least now I know that I am an effective leader and that my chance to standup and shout the news is building inside of me. I don't need to be a full-time lookout but will definitely rise when it is needed.



(Sunrise at Leads)

When I came to Leads I knew that it would be an experience I would not easily forget. As I look back it is true—I will never forget the amazing individuals I met there nor forget the diversity and breadth of leadership in libraries. I will remember the incredible view, the fresh, crisp air and the amazing sunrises that greeted us every morning. I learned that my fears and doubts only hold me back and don't provide any benefit to those counting on me to lead. Look out Libraryland – the PNLA Leadership Institute of 2008 is going to mold the future!

As the leaders of today and the mentors of tomorrow we honor tradition and exceed boundaries as we transform and shape the future. This vision represents the spirit and inspiration of the participants of the 2008 PNLA Leadership Institute and indicates our desire and willingness to embrace the challenges before us. As torchbearers:

PNLA Leads Vision Statement

We breathe life into the intellectual heart of the community to share the gifts of knowledge and imagination through multifunctional facilities, expert staff, and passionate support of our community.

We create inviting spaces that are indispensable to our communities and responsive to those we serve.

We cultivate exploration by sharing knowledge and resources to empower learning at every stage of life.

We position ourselves to be where our users are physically and virtually and strengthen resource accessibility through use of innovative technologies.

We commit to continuous learning so that we are prepared to create libraries our communities deserve and to inspire those who follow us.

We carry the stones from the path of tradition and place them on the path to the future.