The Aha Moments of the Sunshine State Library Leadership Institute

Nora Galbraith, Resource Sharing Librarian and Eridan Thompson, Electronic Resources Librarian
Roux Library, Florida Southern College, Lakeland FL

We are graduates of the Sunshine State Library Leadership Institute, (SSLLI), which is a professional development initiative sponsored by the Florida State Division of Library and Information Services.

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SSLLI is designed to help prepare library leaders to effect high quality library services to meet the needs and challenges of Florida's citizens now and for the future.

We both applied and were accepted into the institute and agreed to commit to attend ten sessions over a period of nine months. We also agreed to select and work with a mentor who would provide advice and guidance during that period.

A key element of the institute is the four professional development foundations:
1.   Core Leadership Competencies
2.   Shared Learning Experiences
3.   Practical Application Assignments
4.   Formal Mentoring

The curriculum included required readings, practical application homework assignments, and subject specific content that helped to guide lectures and discussions. We each had to create our own vision statement and we all had to work on a personal project we wanted to accomplish at our library.

A typical session usually started with the SSLLI faculty asking the group to get out of our comfort zone; we needed to re-group, move, and talk to other people. Later, we would switch seats again to share and discuss with yet another group. We were challenged to think about values, goals, dreams, and passions that seemed clear before attending SSLLI.

At one session, as a small group activity, we worked on the Values Clarification Assessment. This is a test to determine your individual and shared values. As a SSLLI homework assignment we asked our library colleagues to take the test. This experiment fostered a new understanding about other's perceptions about language. One learning outcome from this test was we now better understand the values of our organizational culture.

There were many moments of marvelous clarity and we came to understand that we could all be effective leaders. We were encouraged to think like a leader, which is far different than thinking like a manager or front line staff, and to commit ourselves to leading change that creates concrete benefits to the community.

The SSLLI facilitators were quite adept at helping us form our projects into more achievable ventures. They were formidable guides who taught us how to ask for what we wanted and how to form strategic alliances. They communicated a real sense of enthusiasm, knowledge and purpose.

What We Learned

Do you want to be a leader? Want to or not, if you find yourself in the leadership position, we've learned some good things at SSLLI that were beneficial in our development as leader librarians. All these subjects were addressed during the course of the program, but we really learned through implementation.

Quality Service

One thing that we learned is the importance of adhering to our quality service statement. It does no good to have many projects that are just for

show. Keeping in mind that what is good for the patrons is also good for the library will help us to focus on quality, rather than quantity. It helps to analyze the situation every so often, then put those results in clear data visualization models (graphs and such). Communicate to the community the results and market what you're doing well!
A "Yes" Culture

By focusing on quality, we then naturally became interested in user expectations. Above all, the user expects to have a good experience that results in answered questions and sought-after resources delivered. Sometimes, unfortunately, we cannot be everything to everyone. However, by developing a culture of "Yes" we can ensure a positive user experience. Rather than saying "No", and shutting down all conversation, we offer acceptable alternatives. Rather than saying, "No, we don't have that item," we would say, "That may take a while for us to get. Could we call you when it comes in?"

Leadership Behaviors and You
Another outcome of the institute involved learning about various leadership behaviors and types. There are many different types of leaders and a myriad of behaviors. It is important to know where you fit into that mix. One type of assessment the group was engaged in was taking the DiSC Profile (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, Consciousness), which helps you to learn your leadership style and helps you to approach situations. With this knowledge, you can then structure professional development to build on your personal strengths and restrict your weaknesses.

Librarian Skills
As a library leader, you are going to possess certain leadership skills, whatever your style, but you won't possess all the skills you need. Among the top skills needed are those of project management, data analysis, and assessment. Knowing your own leadership style will then help you with your network of librarians. If you have

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a project to implement, you present your ideas at your library staff-training day, get the staff to buy-in, and build a project team. From there, you can make sure any weaknesses are covered; if data is not your thing, you find a data person to step in. You may need to go out to the community, and create partnerships, to fill some of these voids.

Social Intelligence and Resilience
No matter what your "big picture" is, all your projects have one thing in common; they all rely on human relationships within your network. By mastering the skill of social intelligence which is the ability to get along well with others, and to get them to cooperate with you, you (the library leader) can effectively manage the human emotion and social environment that plays a very real part in all your projects. By regularly administering self-assessments, and asking yourself how you're doing, you can keep the rest of the group on the right path. Sometimes, though, even the best-laid plans don't work out, especially as they go through the higher echelons of the organization. The more complex the project, the more disappointing a rejection can be. That's why your ability to be resilient is such an important trait; it's this ability that will determine the success or failure of all future projects.

At the end of each meeting during the SSLLI program we were required to state our "Aha Moments", things that had dawned on us and finally clicked. Above are our "Aha's", which through these ten sessions, and with time and practice finally came to make sense.