

# It can be tough at the Top: Some Empirical Evidence from Public Library Leaders

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## Abstract

This paper explores the topic of leadership as perceived and practised by public library leaders. Library leaders have a wide-ranging impact on society but have been largely overlooked as the subject of serious study. Prior to this study, only one small *interview*-based study and five *survey*-based studies have been undertaken on public library leaders/leadership — all in North America.

The current study is the most in-depth study to date. Thirty top-level public librarians from Ireland, Britain, and the east coast of the United States were selected for inclusion in this study. This study of the perceptions of senior public library leaders, across national boundaries, makes a theoretical contribution both to the limited extant literature on leadership in librarianship, and the broad corpus of organizational leadership literature. The particular focus of this paper is on the difficulties encountered by the interviewed librarians on public library leadership.

**Keywords:** Public librarians, Leadership difficulties, Library leaders, Library stereotyping

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents new findings on public library leadership, based on empirical data from in-depth interviews with thirty senior library leaders in Ireland, Britain, and the United States. The paper focuses on the centrality of leadership to effective librarianship and, in particular, presents a variety of difficulties and obstacles facing library leaders. This study is exploratory, because of the paucity of previous research specifically addressing the issue of leadership in the public library. Library leaders have a wide-ranging impact on society but have been largely overlooked as the subject of serious study. Prior to this study, only one small *interview*-based study and five *survey*-based studies have been undertaken on public library leaders/leadership — all in North America. No such study on the topic has been researched and published outside of North America.

Within the limited body of literature on leadership in librarianship, many scholars and practitioners emphasize the centrality of leadership to librarianship. Knott (1997) suggests, “the practice of librarianship is fundamentally a process of leadership” (1997: 30). Susan Goldberg Kent (1996), an American public library director, contends that one of the requisites for public libraries to ‘survive and prosper’ is ‘solid and sound leadership’ (1996: 213). She believes that the public library needs reasoned, outspoken, and well-articulated leadership if it is to flourish in a digital future. Goldberg Kent, however, believes that true leadership is difficult “in an institutional culture that abhors change, which is not an uncommon situation in many public libraries today” (1996: 213).

Wedgeworth (1989) found that library leaders endeavour to ‘make a difference’ rather than just be the ‘head of something’, and Bechtel (1993) suggested that librarians tend to serve the professional needs of others rather than their own work-related needs. Berry (2002) asserts that what distinguishes true leaders among librarians is that not only do they have strong convictions, they pursue them on the job and “they hold passionately strong beliefs about libraries and library service. They are driven by their professional concern that no one should be denied information because of his or her point of view, age, or nature of the information” (2002: 8). Illustrating such a commitment, the director of another American public library, Liz Stroup, for example, stated: “Client-centred service is my passion . . . I want every client treated as if she were my mother” (in Sheldon, 1991: 20).

Glogoff (2001) surmises that the path of librarianship over the first two decades of the twenty-first century does not guarantee that libraries will retain the esteem traditionally held for them by the public. He argues that it requires skilful leadership to pilot a course through the enormous challenges looming ahead. Similarly, Schreiber and Shannon (2001) suggest that libraries now require leadership which moves away from the bureaucratic

paternal/maternal model of the past to a more fluid, engaging, and collaborative one. Campbell (2001) reminds library leaders that “it would be dangerous to assume that everyone loves us [i.e., libraries]”, and she suggests that librarians have to battle against views of some people who believe “that libraries have ‘had their day’”.

This study of the perceptions of senior public library leaders, across national boundaries, makes a theoretical contribution, not just to leadership in librarianship, but also to the broader theory of library and information science, and to the broad corpus of literature on organizational leadership. The main aim of this work is to contribute to the existing body of literature on the topic of senior library leadership, addressing the acknowledged gap in that field, as the literature on librarianship had traditionally given very little attention to leadership within librarianship (Riggs, 2001; Winston and Neely, 2001).

## 2. Methodology

The key research question in this study focuses on senior-level public library leaders in Ireland, Britain, and the east coast of the United States. Thirty top-level public librarians were selected for inclusion in this study. Initially, the idea of investigating the perceptions of most (i.e. thirty) Irish city/county chief librarians was considered. In order to broaden the scope of the study, however, it was subsequently decided to include an investigation of library leaders outside Ireland. A decision was then taken to keep the same original total target number (thirty), but to broaden the geographic context by selecting fifty per cent of the interviewees from outside Ireland. While the interviews were subsequently spread over three countries, half of them, rather than one third, were conducted in Ireland for the sake of convenience. The rationale for choosing leaders in Ireland, Britain, and the United States was threefold: (i) their institutions have a long-established and historical culture of providing public libraries funded by public money, (ii) they, along with their peer institutions in other countries, constitute an under-researched group, and (iii) because of their relative convenience of access for the authors. The choice of librarians was influenced by factors such as (i) their relatively high profile nationally, as reflected by their career experience, seniority, public networking profile, and organizational role, (ii) geographic convenience to research itineraries undertaken by the authors, and (iii) availability and co-operation of the library leaders.

Initial contacts for inclusion in the study were made via e-mail. A criterion of qualifying as a research interviewee was that the librarian had to be the top leader, or at least the equivalent of a deputy leader, serving in a public library service. The thirty interviews were conducted in the countries where the participating library leaders worked. Thirty structured questions, based on a review of the relevant research literature, were asked of each of the thirty participating leaders. Most interviews for this study approximated one hour; the shortest was forty minutes and the longest ninety minutes. The thirty interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed to a word processor for subsequent analysis. For analysing the responses, a grounded theory approach to categorizing the data was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Easterby-Smith et al., 1991). Coding in the current study was essentially indexing the interview transcripts, reducing the data to taxonomic classes and categories, and in some cases expanding and teasing out the data in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretation. Segmenting and coding the data enabled the authors to think about the data, to break the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to further scrutinize the data. This coding procedure assisted the authors to think creatively when using the data and generated theories and frameworks. The use of rubrics and colour codes facilitated the subsequent task of data reduction. From this process, nine broad thematic areas emerged from the findings. This paper, in particular, focuses on one of these themes, i.e., the obstacles to effective public library leadership.

## 3. Difficulties Associated with Leading

Heifetz and Linsky (2002: 65) declare, “to lead is to live dangerously”. Howard Gardner (1995) suggests that an exemplary leader “aims so high and carries such burdens” that he or she becomes more prone to the risk of failure, partly because “the greater the accomplishment of the leader” the greater the strain on the leader’s associates. Gardner reports, however, that the exemplary leader “is not thrown by apparent failures”, and must be realistic, because “Whatever our successes, we must all ultimately face our frailty and our limitations” (1995: 289). Hesselbein (1996) suggests that leadership entails “the willingness to remain highly vulnerable”, since “leadership is not a basket of tricks or skills”, but “is the quality and character and courage of the person who is the leader” (1996: 122).

In the current study, the interviewed leaders spoke of a range of difficulties associated with the post of chief librarian, which are analysed under the following headings:

- Paucity of leadership in many libraries
- Onus on library leaders to work long hours
- Leader as a vulnerable person

- Negative stereotyping limiting career prospects outside librarianship
- Toxic or negative leadership
- Miscellaneous difficulties for library leaders.

### 3.1 Paucity of Leadership in Many Libraries

Berry (1998) contends that “leadership is a relatively scarce quality” which may be due to a tension between a true leader and the organization’s rules, boundaries, and policies. He declares that “there are, alas, plenty of leaderless libraries and plenty of libraries that would be intolerant of that basic quality of the leader — that unwillingness to abide by the structure at hand, that unwillingness not to change”, before he concludes by declaring, “Many enterprises and libraries simply cannot tolerate or accept leadership” (1998 6). Brosnahan (1999) suggests that the environment in which public sector leaders operate “is generally not conducive to encouraging leadership”. He believes this is due to “an inherent avoidance of risk in public organizations, which in turn tends to discourage innovation and risk taking” (1999: 13). A phenomenon outlined by the interviewees in the current study is the deliberate choice by potential leaders, or staff with obvious ability, *not* to pursue leadership. Interestingly, the negative responses concerning issues that might discourage librarians from pursuing top leadership positions in librarianship, and claiming that there is a paucity of true leadership among head librarians, were articulated by British interviewees only. The following extracts illustrate why some librarians deliberately choose not to become leaders:

*I have a good member of staff who says she is not interested in becoming a leader. She is very intelligent and has a good handle on all of the issues that she manages in the six branch libraries she runs, but she does not want to be involved in strategic policies, or in politics because that is unpleasant sometimes. She has a better work–life balance. People in the next layer down see the challenges at this level and do not want to engage with those challenges. They know that my job has taken over my life, requires so much personal sacrifice, and it upsets my work–life balance. People see the toll pressure takes on their leader. Many people are too smart to want a leader’s job (British Librarian)*

*London libraries, in particular, have problems recruiting at the moment. There is a lack of leaders. It is partly because of the way the organizations have developed over the last ten years or so, and we have taken on a role of management in the second stage up. Often, where we have librarians at an enquiry desk and managers at a fairly high level, there is very little in the way of progression for people to come up the system. What tends to happen is that the highfliers fly, and have flown, while the low-fliers, the ones that don’t want to move out, stay where they are. Often, staff tend to be parochial within their library authorities. They do not want to move even short distances. People become settled (British Librarian).*

Another interviewee suggested that good leadership is not necessary a corollary of good professional librarianship:

*Some librarians are very good professionals but are lousy leaders. Leadership skills are distinct from the skills of librarianship; therefore, the assumption that a good library professional can be a good leader is not always true (British Librarian).*

The scarcity of good librarians offering themselves for leadership positions, as reported in the study findings, might indicate a self-realization on the part of many library professionals that they may not have the capacity to become good leaders. Such perceptions, which may be founded on realistic self-assessment, together with personal lifestyle decisions not to pursue positions of leadership, might be a factor contributing to the reported dearth of quality leadership candidates.

### 3.2 Onus on Library Leaders to Work Long Hours

One in five of the interviewed library leaders related that they are effectively required to work inordinately long hours, in an effort to adequately or properly address what they considered as an expanding burden of duties. British librarians referred to the widening of their work portfolios since local government structures were reformed in the 1970s. That restructuring rationalized many local government posts, amalgamating diverse new functions, for example, for public librarians who assumed additional non-library functions, such as, responsibilities for arts, museums, and archives. Reductions in the number of strategic personnel in libraries also increased the need for longer workdays for chief librarians. The following extracts from some participants illustrate this:

*I normally work sixty to seventy hours per week, but I get paid for only thirty-five of them, and that is the pace I work at. Everybody else works thirty-five hours. I work at the weekends, not in here, but maybe at a branch. I tend to come into work after 7.00 a.m. and often I work two or three evenings a week if I have a commitment to go to a work-related meeting or function. Running the public library service is one of the jobs that I do, but I also run community education and I run the museum service, school libraries, and the cultural sector. So, I have five areas.*

*I have some team leaders, but I have about two hundred staff altogether across those five service areas. I am a librarian that came up through the ranks of managing the public library service, and now, with the restructuring and the emphasis on lifelong learning being amalgamated, I ended up being interviewed for a job I got which brings all five service areas together. I don't like the multi-functional job I do now, because I am a chartered librarian and librarianship is what I am good at, but the job that I do now has become so diluted. I have five hats on at this level and it is the dilution of the things that I love with all of the things that I don't like (British Librarian).*

*My remit is wider than libraries; it includes museums as well. I work about fifty hours a week. I am trying to be a bit more sensible. I do take work home, but trying to get sufficient blocks of time outside the office is difficult (British Librarian).*

*I put in extra hours. Usually my days stretch beyond straightforward hours from 9.30 to 5.00, but that goes with the job. If there is something important going on after office hours I would be there for it (Irish Librarian).*

*Despite the fact that I am away a lot, none of my staff works longer than the amount of hours I spend working. Many people believe that the way I work, like putting in the extra hours, is not the way to work (Irish Librarian).*

The commitment of participants to their careers effectively requires them to work long hours, as illustrated in the above quotations. As extra duties have been added to the post of chief librarian over the last number of years, there is a danger that inadequate time is available for strategic leadership of public libraries. This issue requires to be addressed by public library authorities. The above examples illustrate an increasing burden on chief public librarians, who also complained that an increased amount of administration dilutes their application both to librarianship and to leadership. Interestingly, none of the American participants mentioned anything about pressures of having to work long hours due to work demands. Further study should investigate if American staffing structures might have higher ratios of senior management staff to deal with strategic issues.

### 3.3 The Leader as a Vulnerable Person

Elliot Shelkrot, director of the Free Library of Philadelphia, who emphasizes the centrality of effective listening and interpersonal skills for gaining staff commitment, suggests that “Vulnerability is the key to good communication” and he admits to always having had a “certain lack of self-confidence — particularly when starting a new job” (in Sheldon, 1991: 25).

Avolio (1999), however, sees leader vulnerability as a positive challenge for leaders. He also believes that a leader's management of vulnerability can foster transformational relationships. Various aspects of leader vulnerability were discussed by many of the participants in this study. The thirty interviewees affirm that the modern library leader is far from omnipotent when dealing with staff. Instead, vulnerability is seen not only as an attendant condition, but also as a desired quality of a library leader.

*Being vulnerable is also a helpful thing as it helps leaders to avoid taking unnecessary organizational risks. If leaders do not feel vulnerable, they need to question what they are doing. Without feeling vulnerable, leaders are likely to go off on uncritical paths and then find themselves in troubled scenarios. I would always try to run ideas or plans through staff, to weigh up the pros and cons, before implementing plans. This contributes to participative leadership (Irish Librarian).*

Interviewees who contributed to this study also spoke of the vulnerability of leaders *before* they gain experience at the top level. In the absence of a template for leadership, librarians need to learn their leadership skills in real situations, even if that means learning from mistakes:

*Leaders learn best in the deep end. That is in the real situation after being appointed to a leadership position. When I was appointed librarian, I really wondered if I would be up to the job; I began to doubt by abilities. As time went on, however, I found myself learning leadership on the job. What one learns on the job is so important and it is something you can learn only when you are operating in the deep end. It is like driving a car; the only way to learn is when you are in the driving seat (Irish Librarian).*

*The more experience you have the better leader you are. I took that job of chief librarian when I was quite young and I learned some things the hard way, and I made some mistakes. I can see where I made mistakes now. I made mistakes with people and systems. I will not make them again (Irish Librarian).*

The findings from the current study, regarding library leaders feeling vulnerable when at the receiving end of negative attention from staff, confirm Henington (1994) who reported similar experiences from America:

*One of the things I have learned about being a Director is that you can't please everyone and you have to understand that not everyone will like you. This goes with the job. If you have to make tough decisions, then*

*those decisions are likely to offend or upset one group or another. That's life and that's why we get paid the big bucks* (Goldberg Kent, in Henington, 1994: 102).

#### 3.4 Negative Stereotyping Limiting Career Prospects Outside Librarianship

Forty per cent of British interviewees expressed frustration over bureaucratic restrictions and they also raised the issue of their own failures to change to careers outside of librarianship. They had discovered, when applying for senior posts outside of librarianship, that they were not considered suitably experienced candidates for employment in those careers, due to negative stereotyping of librarians as organizational managers. Because of external stereotyping of library leaders, librarians argued that they are effectively limited from pursuing personal career development outside librarianship:

*The head librarian's post is not high status and it is not highly paid. Employers do not recognize the transferable skills that we have and people have the stereotypical image of the librarian as not being very dynamic, proactive, manager/leader material, charismatic, and all of those things that the private sector have. We are not blessed with that image, and that image is damn hard to shake off. People assume that the entrepreneurial spirit resides exclusively in the private sector, so we do not appear to portray or cultivate an entrepreneurial image in the public sector* (British Librarian).

One American interviewee suggested:

Other librarians also reflected on difficulties associated with negative stereotyping of library leaders by private sector managers. The interviewees believed that this effectively forced librarians to remain in the same career, even if they found this frustrating due to financial constraints on service development:

*Development of the service is constrained mostly through lack of staff and other resources, which encroaches on my time a lot because of the lack of staff. I wish I had many more professionals, including a programme director whose job I have to do* (American Librarian).

*Many people need library services, but community officials, legislators, and the general public are not willing to fund the service at the right level. A library service needs more than just a few thousand dollars. People just do not realize the cost of books, the cost of staff, and the demand for qualified staff. There are just so many things they do not understand and they just do not care* (American Librarian).

A librarian in the London region mirrored the same lack of personal career prospects for library leaders outside the career of librarianship:

*I enjoy what I do, but as I rise up the ladder it becomes more difficult to leave, since wherever else I go I would tend to go in at the bottom of any scale — and in the meantime I have a family to support, so that isn't an option* (British Librarian).

Interestingly, one librarian, who took five years out from the profession and worked in a private sector firm before returning to public librarianship, contended that training in the private sector was more demanding, as it was more proactively results oriented. He expressed a difference of approach between the private and public sector professions:

*I worked in a private company, and working for a private limited company affects your mindset. It makes you become quite sharp at making decisions and looking at areas where we are wasting money or wasting time. That type of training has made me impatient, and it trained me to deal with the specific issue. Since then, I deal with a point and then move on* (Irish Librarian).

In general, the participants reported that people working in the private sector typically do not associate organizational entrepreneurship with librarians. The participants believe that this contributes to negative stereotyping of librarians, particularly if they apply for careers in the private sector.

#### 3.5 Negative or Toxic Leadership

Carson, Carson, and Phillips (1997) observed that, regardless of rank, there is always someone to whom people must answer to, but, “undoubtedly, one or more of these ranking administrators will be quite difficult to work with. In fact, one or more of them may be considered to have a difficult, if not a defective, personality” (1997: 158). The far-reaching, all-pervasive, and organizationally devastating impact of a defective leader was also articulated in the interview data. This brief quotation pithily sums up the immeasurable negative consequences of toxic leadership:

*A bad leader can ruin a generation of staff* (Irish Librarian).

This coincides with Ghoshal and Bartlett (1998) who contended that leaders have huge moral responsibilities over a generation of individuals and, therefore, make a major positive or negative difference to a society — a society of

staff, customers, and related stakeholders. While the library leaders in this study did not articulate negative concerns for their current superior officers, they did share accounts of defective leadership traits in other chief librarians, both among their current peers and previous bosses at chief librarian level. The following quotations illustrate these experiences:

*I had head librarians whose management style I would not agree with. I recall behaviours that I would not want to do or to replicate. I worked in organizations where you would be transferred from one service point to another in a day, and out of it again the next day. I worked in organizations where the leader sat inside a locked office at all times, and would not talk to you unless you were a senior member of staff. I worked in organizations where the so-called leader sat in her ivory-tower office and never left it to talk to staff in branches (Irish Librarian).*

The same interviewee affirmed the need for good leaders:

*While good leadership is a major factor in determining organizational success, if the leadership is not the right type of leadership, this has a seriously negative effect. . . . Where a leader is negative, negativity is transmitted throughout the organization (Irish Librarian).*

Critical comments on negativity from leaders were articulated by other interviewees also:

*An autocratic leader in a library service prevents the organization from working effectively (British Librarian).*

*Excessive exercising of power and control and not being willing to delegate are among the worst traits of a bad leader (Irish Librarian).*

Carson, Carson, and Phillips (1997) observed that a leader, rather than an employee, with a negative profile is much more damaging to an organization as they have “the legitimate power of their offices to influence an organization’s direction”, and they declare, “most people with sociopathic tendencies don’t typically wind up in prison — in fact, many wind up in the cushioned leather chairs of administrative offices” (1997: 158, 161). Carson, Carson, and Phillips add that, “trying to change sociopathic library administrators is impossible — it can’t be done”, and colleagues who attempt to change them can “be setting themselves up to be scapegoated, victimized, abused” (1997: 162).

As no system is in place to easily dismiss problem or negative leaders, such as where a chief librarian would normally be appointed only for a limited contractual period and would be required to compete for reappointment after a specified number of years, very little can be done to stop the tenure of a seriously negative library leader. This is a matter that might usefully be addressed by library parent bodies.

### 3.6 Miscellaneous Difficulties for Library Leaders

Various difficulties or challenges for leaders were articulated throughout the interviews. These challenges were too varied to classify under collective headings, but, some of these are represented in the following quotations from the interviewees. Professional frustrations arising from difficulties associated with the lack of effective internal communication were articulated:

*You can communicate lots but people do not necessarily hear or read what you communicate (British Librarian)*

*In every organization that I have worked in, including this one, our communications are far from perfect. Communicating is one of the things that we are worst at and it is one of the things that we recognize that we need to be good at, and it is one of the things we try to address, but communication is one of the things that we do not address sufficiently (British Librarian).*

Some of the miscellaneous difficulties facing today’s public library leaders arise from the larger external environment, such as cultural or societal changes, which have undermined traditional patronage and autocratic control, sometimes resulting in apathy:

*Nobody today is dependent on the director for their job. The Jack Welch style of strong leadership is difficult to use in modern contemporary library organizations. Challenges to a leader can result from labour unions, and other issues, like high levels of competencies, specializations and so on that strengthen other people’s relative positions in organizations (American Librarian).*

*Apathy from the general public is a major constraint on library development. There is a lot of apathy here in America today for the public library service. There is a lack of interest. There is a lack of commitment. There is a lack of understanding of what a library is and what it does (American Librarian).*

Increased leadership pressures also arise due to threats from external organizational environments:

*I do feel, all of the time, we are fighting a battle to bring more and more people into the library because there are so many other elements out there competing against us (Irish Librarian).*

Two British librarians complained of bureaucratic constraints that frustrate their efforts to develop their services:

*Our council is a controlled organization. Council management does not allow autonomy to librarians. Within the bureaucratic framework I try to empower staff, but there is not much room to manoeuvre* (British Librarian).

*Trying to carry things forward has been frustrating and I need to remind myself that I do not need to get frustrated* (British Librarian).

Another difficulty associated with leadership in the public sector is that financial or material bonuses cannot be offered to employees. One leader said that all she can do is to show appreciation and gratitude as a substitute for more concrete inducements. Overall, however, the leaders interviewed for this study were optimistic about leadership in public libraries, despite the variety of difficulties. The quotations on leadership difficulties above emerged at random throughout the research interviews, rather than from specific questions.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings in this study suggest that leadership is a broad and complex phenomenon. The interviewed leaders articulated that leadership is an essential organizational skill but one without a formula, that is, with 'no absolutes'. Analysis of the data revealed, overall, that respondents were not acutely focused on leadership as a phenomenon distinct from management. The findings suggest that some interviewees were focused on bureaucracy and management, rather than on innovation, creativity, vision, and other areas associated with classical leadership.

A core finding in this study supports arguments in the literature suggesting a widespread dearth of leadership *practice* in public librarianship. One Irish and five British librarians articulated that: 'many head librarians are not making the changeover from librarians to leaders', 'Some library chiefs do not have the mental picture of themselves as real managers or leaders', or 'they are books people, sometimes they are authors, but they are not leaders'. Additionally, an increasing amount of administration duties for chief librarians is seen as diluting their application both to librarianship and to leadership.

All thirty respondents discussed constraints on their organizational leadership, but added that one of their functions was to challenge and overcome obstacles. One constraint common to all respondents was the lack of adequate financial resources and staffing levels. The participants argued that leadership ability counted for little in the absence of adequate resources. Overall, librarians complained about an increasing amount of bureaucracy, regulation and administration. Apathy from the general public was an issue that hampered greater investment in resources. Another reported difficulty was the lack of continuity arising from career changes among senior local authority personnel. Trade unions occasionally challenge leadership plans or decisions. Sometimes political constraint/interference could obstruct a librarian's leadership strategies. Some respondents complained of inadequate time for attending to their workload. Staff incompetence was also seen as an issue that hampered organizational effectiveness. The apparent common acceptance of the relatively low public profile of libraries, despite libraries being such a widely used public institution, was seen as an obstacle to the adequate financing and development of libraries. The ongoing necessity of having to repeatedly remind suppliers and other stakeholders to respond to administrative requests was described as an obstacle that wasted much time and effort for leaders. Libraries that did not provide sufficient numbers of strategic posts were also seen to limit career development strategies for prospective library leaders.

The librarians saw public libraries, as 'the bastions of social inclusion', and as a key contributor to the well-being and development of society. All thirty respondents shared these sentiments, affirming that libraries 'can make a difference in people's lives in terms of improving their personal situation, whether that is in a better job, better health, or enhancing their lives generally'. Libraries were also seen as agents of local cultural change. This effect was also viewed as a counter culture to possible negative social environments, such as localized criminal cultures among young citizens. The librarians are very conscious that the future of libraries should be a catalyst for adding value to individual and societal worth.

When investigating the respondents' professional priorities, one librarian replied, 'You can reduce all library management to two things: people working in the library must love books and love people'. This view sums up the thrust of the responses from the thirty library leaders as, overall, they focused on serving the public and on supporting staff. While contributors agreed that 'the two most important things about a library culture are delivery of service and inter-staff relations', a constant theme underlying these priorities was the library's traditional and staple service product: 'Our core business is libraries, books, and information'. Despite a multiplicity of constraints articulated in the empirical findings, all participants expressed optimism for overcoming most obstacles through leadership skills.

## 5. Conclusions

Notwithstanding the variety of difficulties outlined above, but in agreement with Berry (1998), the findings conclude “When an organization has true leaders and can tolerate them, it succeeds like no other. I guess that is why leadership is still, as it should be, the holy grail of librarianship” (1998: 6). One of the objectives of this study was the exploration of current leadership theory in the context of public librarianship, subscribing to Bass’s (1990) assertion that “One cannot understand leadership in a vacuum” (1990: xii). Arguments throughout the study support the centrality of leadership for optimal strategic and operational practices in the field of public librarianship. The above findings, however, illustrate that there are many internal and external obstacles which public library leaders have to contend with on an ongoing basis.

Despite the variety of difficulties outlined above, the interviewed librarians typically expressed a determination to overcome whatever obstacles they encounter and to continue in a profession which they see as playing an integral and significant part in the social and economic development of their communities. Intrinsic worth of the public library service was articulated as a strong motivator for library leaders to overcome obstacles so that they might positively impact on people’s lives, through a career that they see as inherently enriching for themselves as well as the public they serve.

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