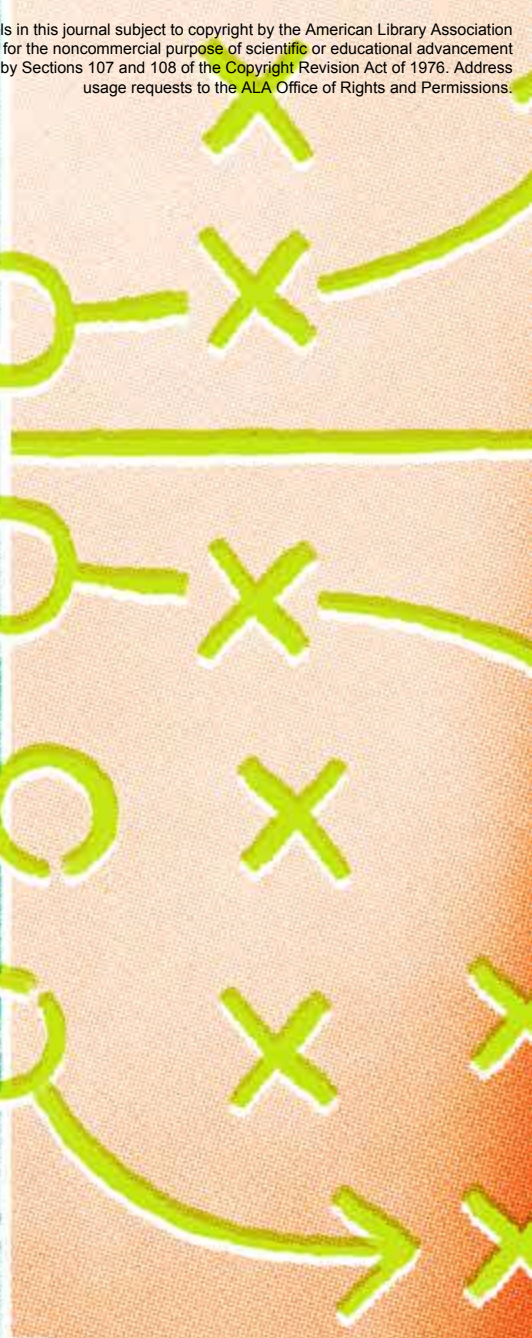


# FEATURE

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ACHIEVING THAT ELUSIVE

"LEADERSHIP

EFFORT

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**A**thletes strive to achieve “the zone.” “It is that realm of play in which everything—skill, training, and mental discipline—comes together, and players feel themselves lifted to a level of peak performance in which limits seem to fall away” (Cooper 2009). Reaching the “leadership zone” happens when librarians tap into the extraordinary skills lying within to overcome obstacles and transform sometimes-difficult situations into meaningful outcomes. Maturing into an experienced leader who stays in the leadership zone requires knowledge, training, and practice. This article provides tactical leadership tips to assist in developing school librarians as leaders who have the mental focus to guide their school library programs through today’s changing environment.

Embedded in the five leadership tips that follow are actions to practice. When an athlete is directed by a coach, trainer, or pro to smooth out rough spots in habits negatively impacting the athlete’s performance, the first homework assignment is to practice the new or refined technique. Leadership is no different. The desired change is for school librarians to make decisions and seamlessly implement focused actions with less stress and more success—and practicing leadership strategies makes these actions possible. As you read each section, self-assess your current status. Then take action by carrying out the suggested tips. Soon you, too, will develop the confidence, courage, and perseverance that define leaders who work in the leadership zone.

### **Tip #1. Stay Connected to Your National Professional Association**

AASL members benefit from association leadership on issues related to intellectual freedom, information-technology policy, advocacy, and legislative lobbying. Resources such as the AASL Forum provide members a means for discussion of and action on problems that arise in school libraries. For example, when I needed to defend against a particularly contentious book challenge, comments and discussion on the AASL Forum suggested I contact the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). This tip was valuable. The OIF provided me with legal cases and targeted terminology to defend the county review committee’s position to retain the material. The knowledge OIF provided me was immediate and effective. Association resources provide just-in-time information and assistance, enabling school librarians to lead their learning communities through sometimes-difficult situations with confidence. Confidence is an essential leadership trait.

Leaders benefit from networking with a community of professionals. AASL provides social networking and web-based connectivity for members to meet. Opportunities to participate in webinars and other professional development sessions bring professionals together to explore new ideas. AASL also solicits members to become part of teams that work on association initiatives. When members participate in virtual and face-to-face meetings, lasting ties with colleagues in the library profession develop. The interactions among librarians are a continual source of inspiration and creativity. Leaders are involved in their association, serve on committees, and work with colleagues virtually and face-to-face.

Federal and state agencies consider AASL *the* authority when it comes to learning standards and program standards for school libraries. Each review and revision of AASL standards is based on research with a nod to the future. School librarians who are leaders use these standards to set the baseline for school library programs. The well-developed implementation plans assist librarians in leading instructional change that positively impacts student achievement. Through relevant updates to standards and guidelines the association provides a solid framework for school librarians to be in the forefront of instructional trends and issues. Leaders integrate AASL guidelines and learning strategies into students’ learning experiences.

AASL provides many more resources to school librarians, including a journal of current issues in the field, professional development opportunities, guidelines for best practices, and research on library-related issues. Leaders seek information and guidance from AASL when planning for their library programs. The entire learning community ultimately benefits from a school librarian whose practices are grounded by association research.

#### *Leadership Zone Actions to Practice*

- Attain increased confidence by using association research and resources to become knowledgeable about school library initiatives.
- Volunteer for professional association task forces and committee work to develop a network of professional contacts.
- Implement the AASL learning standards and incorporate them into every instructional experience.

## Tip #2. Articulate a Library Program Vision That Defines the Future

Leaders embrace a culture of innovation and recognize that adapting to societal changes helps the school library program remain relevant (Martin 2013, 155). To encourage acceptance of these concepts, school librarians must be willing to stand behind new ideas and methods. Since a direct relationship exists between words and actions, leaders understand that making improvements and updating the library program vision is a leader's responsibility. Leaders create buy-in for a revised library vision each time they provide effective support for administrators, teachers, and students. Seasoned leaders have an eye for relevance and explain new initiatives in a language users understand.

Leaders seek information about emerging resources and update the library vision. AASL revises the standards and guidelines every ten years, and school librarians who implement these revisions have an edge over those who do not. The modifications are the result of committee members' scanning the educational environment and considering many factors, including student values, educational methodology, and emerging resource formats. AASL taps members to serve on a committee to merge the research with evolving best practices. A leader incorporates these new initiatives developed by AASL into the library program vision. Leadership is immersing oneself in innovative language, processes, and programs through training via conferences, webinars, and professional articles. Often AASL training provides talking points to use when introducing an updated library vision to school

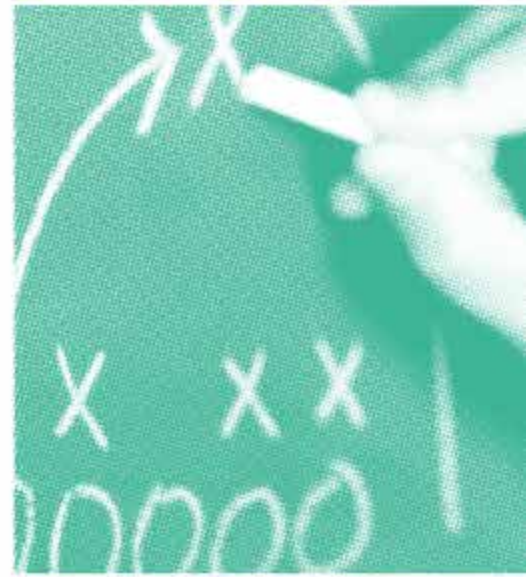
leaders, teachers, students, and parents.

Once a leader is versed in the benchmarks for change, a plan can be developed to systematically embed innovative program improvements into the minds and hearts of the learning community. A good approach for assuring success includes outlining the vision, strategic goals, timeline, and budget in a one-page summary. A leader positions the proposal in such a way that implementation is achievable. If a major shift in funding is needed, then a leader figures out where that shift of dollars will come from. Providing thoughtful consideration to any concerns administrators, teachers, and students may have can be achieved by asking each group for input. Addressing the needs of each group will encourage acceptance of changes.

Effective leadership transforms current practices into a relevant future. General Eric K. Shinseki, a retired four-star United States Army general, stated, "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less" (Dao and Shanker 2009). The gateway to acceptance of innovation is providing value and relevance to users. Using professional development, leaders focus on skills and competencies that need updating and then integrate changes into the school library program. "School librarians who are innovative understand the direct relationship between innovation and staying relevant" (Martin 2013, 153).

### *Leadership Zone Actions to Practice*

- Use AASL research and implementation strategies for revised learning standards and guidelines to create a vision for the library program.



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- Position the library vision in such a way that it is achievable.
- Create value for users when launching innovative changes to the library program vision.

### **Tip #3. Model the Skills and Practices of Effective Management**

Modeling is a powerful tool. Every action, reaction, and communication is an opportunity to demonstrate best practices. Whether leaders are making decisions, connecting to people in the organization, or planning next steps they have the opportunity to make each end result more *or* less effective. A good leader tackles situations constructively to turn them into positive initiatives for the school library program.

Leaders model the thinking process that goes into decision making. Some requests are simple and require an immediate response. Other requests impact scheduling or programing and deserve more thoughtful consideration. A brief pause provides time for librarians who are leaders to analyze what is being said, by whom, and for what purpose. Leaders thrive on stepping back before jumping to conclusions. School librarians can practice pausing and giving themselves time to think through requests that impact their library programs. There is nothing wrong with saying, "Tell me about your need and let me get back to you by the end of the day." The pause when answering programing requests is a decision-making skill that is critical for high-quality results.

Communication is critical when creating a unified organization. Leaders intentionally engage in conversations with people in the organization. A school librarian who talks candidly with teachers and students creates understanding as needs surface during discussions.

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Understanding the perspective of users leads to mutually beneficial solutions since colleagues and students own part of the solution. When conveying information leaders use the right tool among the many available—including e-mail, texting, blogs, memos, and formal documents—and then insert a human element into each communication (Martin 2013, 77). This human element may come through follow-up discussions or surveys to check for understanding.

Planning the next steps for the school library program is a wonderful opportunity for librarians to practice organizational skills. Just as librarians encourage students to self-assess their own work, leaders model how to analyze committee work to evaluate weaknesses and strengths. Leaders also insist that colleagues share ideas, provide opportunities for colleagues to work in groups, and help them manage and prioritize their time. “Leaders are coaches of a team of workers. They must display dispositions that they wish their colleagues to display. By instilling these same attitudes in colleagues, leaders create a foundation for an accomplished organization” (Martin 2013, 44). Effective management of the school library program results when librarians think before they act, communicate clearly, and provide efficient shared opportunities for others to be a part of library reform.

#### *Leadership Zone Actions to Practice*

- Before taking action pause to think through important requests that impact the library program.
- Understand the perspective of colleagues and students by talking with coworkers and students.
- Identify and refine personal dispositions such as emotional resiliency, persistence,

productivity, creativity, and motivation.

#### **Tip #4. Empower Others**

The biggest detriment to empowerment is lack of trust. Reluctance to let go of control is a problem that leaders must overcome to be successful. School librarians who find it difficult to give tasks to colleagues need to determine why. Often leaders who are reluctant to turn over responsibility for tasks fear the job will be accomplished in a way that is unlike the way they would have tackled the work. If the task is accomplished, then what difference does it make if the path to success is unlike the leader’s path? Leaders respect results and trust colleagues’ skills, competencies, and knowledge base.

What if something goes wrong? Leaders use missteps as training opportunities. To keep the project moving forward, leaders take time to guide colleagues through an evaluation of the process and assist colleagues with reviewing the plan. One way to ensure successful progress is to hold colleagues accountable for the work they perform. Just as school librarians break research into steps for students, good leaders break down committee work and tasks into smaller goals with specific deadlines.

Successful leaders achieve empowerment by delegating responsibility gradually over time. Assigning work to others generates opportunities for those with specific skills to further the work of the library program. Effective leaders provide training and tools along with each increased responsibility. Leaders design templates, such as a form for committee reports, or develop a process for project management so that colleagues understand that their actions, results, and efficiency are

sequential. Leaders know that group ownership is achieved when all members contribute their skills to projects. Empowerment is extremely important to teamwork and sustains the energy level in a library and learning community.

#### *Leadership Zone Actions to Practice*

- Develop respect and trust for colleagues’ skills and competencies.
- When delegating work to others, break tasks into smaller goals with deadlines.
- When entrusting others with tasks provide training in processes and give clear directions that are easily understood and doable.

#### **Tip #5. Sharpen Job Skills**

Honing in on skills needed to be an exemplary librarian requires continuous effort. School librarians are expected to be leaders, instructional partners, information specialists, teachers, and program administrators. Within each of these roles are responsibilities that must be adapted as the educational environment changes.

Effective school librarians enroll in professional development that targets emerging technologies, resources, and curriculum. Librarians need these skills when “guiding learners to become engaged and effective users of ideas and information, and to appreciate literature” (AASL 2010). Training enables leaders to remain in the forefront of new educational initiatives. Librarians are lifelong learners who embrace the intrinsic rewards that result when knowledge and skills are extended. Failure to update library-related job skills such as instructional methods, techniques for collaboration with other educators, and curriculum design results in stagnant leadership of any library program.

A major aspect of the school librarian's job is readers' advisory. To be a literacy leader, librarians must read new books from a diverse group of authors for the level of students they serve. It is amazing that librarians will offer students graphic novels without encouraging young readers to move into longer powerful literature. When I moved from an elementary school to a middle school I spent my first year bringing books home to read. Reading all those books enabled me to put the right book into the right students' hands. Being a librarian leader requires developing "strategic readers who can comprehend, analyze, and evaluate text in both print and digital formats" (AASL 2010). One way to foster this development is to be well versed in the literature and familiar with the work of authors currently writing for students. Students and parents expect the school librarian to be familiar with literature for their particular level and needs. In addition, knowing the collection avoids problems resulting from an accidental referral of questionable materials.

Analysis of the key competencies of a school librarians' job is essential to the future of the library program. Leaders self-assess their skills and make notes of the practices in which they are proficient and those skills that need improvement. Next, leaders find the best method to renew and update their skills and use their new knowledge to create a better library program.

### *Leadership Zone Actions to Practice*

- Review the responsibilities of each of the roles of a school librarian and identify two skills to update within a targeted timeframe.
- Commit to reading books and getting to know diverse authors represented in the library collection.
- Examine your current technology competencies and update one skill by a specific milestone date.

### **Conclusion**

AASL operates in the leadership zone because it is an organization that taps into members' extraordinary skills—skills that can transform the future of school libraries. If AASL is a model of leadership, then school librarians who practice leadership strategies are models for their learning communities. Being in the leadership zone means focusing in on the skills, practices, and actions that bring energy and strength to your day and, consequently, to your library program. As you concentrate on the many-faceted aspects of leadership and infuse the skills into your daily work you will achieve unity within. Your mind and your actions will become automatic and go beyond what you imagined possible. Keep track of the exceptional experiences, breakthrough occurrences, and personal revelations that just seem to happen, but in actuality, are the result of your efforts to work in the leadership zone.



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2008–2009, is a former educational specialist for library services at Henrico

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