



## CHAPTER 4

# Cultivating Liaison Leadership: *Pathways to Management*

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## Introduction

Despite developing strong campus connections and collaborative relationships, liaison librarians frequently lack the supervisory experience required to advance within academic libraries. While the landscape of academic librarianship has evolved, there is a continued desire for managers with demonstrated supervisory experience (Neigel, 2015; Henricks & Henricks-Lepp, 2014; Maciel, Kaspar, & vanDuinkerken, 2018). This presents a conundrum for librarians in liaison roles seeking progressively responsible job duties, as liaison positions do not consistently incorporate supervision of library workers. This chapter highlights the structure of a library liaison program that provides opportunities for liaisons to develop managerial skills and gain supervisory experience. This shared supervisory structure is not often seen in liaison programs but offers a compelling framework for leadership development within the profession.

At the University of Houston (UH) Libraries, the Liaison Services department was restructured to address changes in staffing and leadership as well as meet evolving campus needs. Leveraging the strengths of existing department members, the new structure dispersed supervisory responsibilities among a department head and three

supervising coordinator positions through the creation of functional teams. This structure is a microcosm of the team-based model of librarianship developed at the University of Guelph, where all librarians and library staff across departments were organized into functional, integrative service, infrastructure, or cross-functional teams (Ridley, Salmon, Steeves, & Kirwin, 2009). Liaison Services adapted the Guelph functional team structure, creating new management opportunities for some of the liaison librarians leading these teams.

This chapter advocates for the creation of structures that give liaison librarians supervisory responsibilities in order to create pathways to administrative and higher-level management positions for them. Using the UH Libraries Liaison Services department as a case study, the authors explore the benefits of a supervising coordinator model and the limitations of this structure. This in-depth exploration delineates what is possible for the professional growth of liaison librarians and the future health of the library leadership pipeline.

## Literature Review

### *Skills and Abilities of Liaison Librarians*

The role of a liaison librarian is one of constant change and adaptation. Early iterations of subject or liaison librarianship emphasized the work of material selection and bibliography, but as the focus of libraries has shifted from collections to user engagement, so have liaison roles (Dempsey & Malpas, 2018). In a 2015 SPEC Kit for the Association of Research Libraries, Miller and Pressley describe liaison services as “one of the most dynamic areas of library organizations, constantly evolving in response to or in anticipation of the surrounding community’s activities, needs, and expectations” (p. 12). Liaisons are learning to lead through change and are both flexible and adaptable to the evolving library and higher education landscape.

Liaison librarians are, for most academic libraries, the face of their organization, tasked with building relationships with their assigned departments, centers, institutes, or co-curricular programs. Engaging with and learning about members of their university or college community is central to their work. As Jaguszewski and Williams state, “Building strong relationships with faculty and other campus professionals, and establishing collaborative partnerships within and across institutions, are necessary building blocks to librarians’ success” (2013, p. 4). This work necessitates a specific set of skills and abilities that will foster “innovation, collaboration, and partnership” (Church-Duran, 2017, p. 258). Effective communication skills, a user-centered approach to librarianship, a desire to understand and meet the needs of university/college community members, and the ability to teach well are all critical to the success of the liaison librarian (Miller & Pressley, 2015).

Liaison librarians are, in many ways, “connectors” who link faculty, students, and staff to library services, initiatives, collections, and instruction. Their work is collaborative, responsive, and interdependent (Miller & Pressley, 2015, pp. 12–15). As Jaguszewski and Williams state, “No liaison is an island,” and liaison librarians, keenly aware of library activity and procedure, know how to best leverage the strengths of colleagues to meet user needs (2013, pp. 12–14; Miller & Pressley, 2015, p. 15).

The skill set that liaisons develop as engagement facilitators and collaborators afford them the opportunity to serve as leaders within professional associations or within the university community. These opportunities give librarians “with limited supervisory responsibilities” the avenue to develop “mentoring and coaching skills,” experience with consensus building, and collegial decision-making (Farrell, 2014a, p. 312; Matthews, 2002, p. 581). However, leadership skills developed through service and association work will not meet the expectation of supervisory experience required for most management positions in academic libraries. A cursory glance at job advertisements for library managers highlights this need, as does ALA’s *What Library Managers Need to Know* career education article, which lists, under required experience, “a couple of years of supervisory experience” (2011). There are simply some skills that are more difficult to develop without direct management experience (ideally coupled with professional leadership development). These include the ability to manage the relationship between library administration and librarians; provide feedback on job performance, progress, and problems to direct reports; and manage across generations and personality types (Madden, Carscaddon, Hampton, & Helmstutler, 2017). Supervisors also need to understand institution-specific human resource policies and management strategies relative to hiring, disciplinary actions, performance evaluations, (re-)defining professional relationships, conflict management, and succession planning (Westfall, Johnson, & Royse, 2013).

Opportunities for liaisons to move into departmental or administrative supervisory positions in their current institutions can be limited. Blessinger notes in a 2002 article that “in some organizations, the only way to get ahead is to get out” (“Job Mobility,” para. 1). This is strongly echoed in a study of early-career librarians by Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, and Vassiliadis in which “eighty-four percent of respondents replied that in order for them to advance in their careers they needed to change jobs” (2007, p. 72). Librarians are seeking career growth at early, mid, and senior career levels, yet report an inability to advance their careers within their current organizations (Mallon, 2014; Tucker, 2008; Neville & Henry, 2017). For early-career librarians looking for mentoring and professional development, changing organizations can help them attain the skills and experiences necessary to shape their next steps toward mid-career advancement. Mid-career librarians who want to avoid burnout and find a balance between careers and changing personal lives

may look for opportunities at institutions that foster renewal and the opportunity to pursue new responsibilities. Senior career librarians who feel they have reached a plateau at their current organization may seek change that offers new challenges and opportunities to re-engage professionally. Academic libraries consistently fail at creating opportunities for employee advancement, resulting in attrition and loss of institutional knowledge as these employees move to roles elsewhere.

## *An Administrative Ideal*

The library literature on the most desirable skills for administrators reveals that it is the leadership competencies typically embodied by effective liaisons that rise to the top. Herson, Powell, and Young interviewed ARL directors about the attributes they believe future ARL directors need to have in order to be successful (2002). First and foremost is a commitment to service, followed by effective communication skills and the ability to function in a political environment (Herson, Powell, & Young, 2002, p. 85). Liaison librarians are developing these skills as they work closely with faculty and colleagues across the institution and the profession. Library employees look to their leaders to be “visionaries, risk takers, good collaborators and communicators, mentors, and people with uncommon passion and persistence” (Gjeltén & Fishel, 2006, p. 412). To do this, and do this well, leaders need to understand the intricacies of library work and what it means for an academic library to meaningfully engage with their campus community. Good liaisons do this on a daily basis, as it is integral to their work.

However, possession of leadership skills is only one piece of what is necessary to be a good administrator. Top administrators need to be good managers, too (Kotter, 1990, p.103). In the classic article, *What Leaders Really Do*, John P. Kotter states, “Leadership is different from management, but not for the reasons most people think” (1990, p. 103). He draws a nuanced line between leadership and management, noting that the two are complementary but distinct. Leadership “is about coping with change” while “management is about coping with complexity” (Kotter, 1990, p. 104). Where leadership provides a common direction, vision, and the inspiration needed to motivate people, management is the planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, and problem-solving that is needed to achieve a shared vision (Kotter, 1990, p. 104). Both are necessary for an organization to thrive, particularly organizations like libraries that must contend with constant change and variable resources.

Although library administrators typically manage a small group of people, they set the management tone for their organization and determine how local policies are implemented. To fulfill the mission of their libraries, administrators need to be aware of—and concerned with—the culture of their organization and how the organization is both managed and led. Both of these factors help determine an organization’s culture, performance level, and success (Warrick, 2017). The library literature has

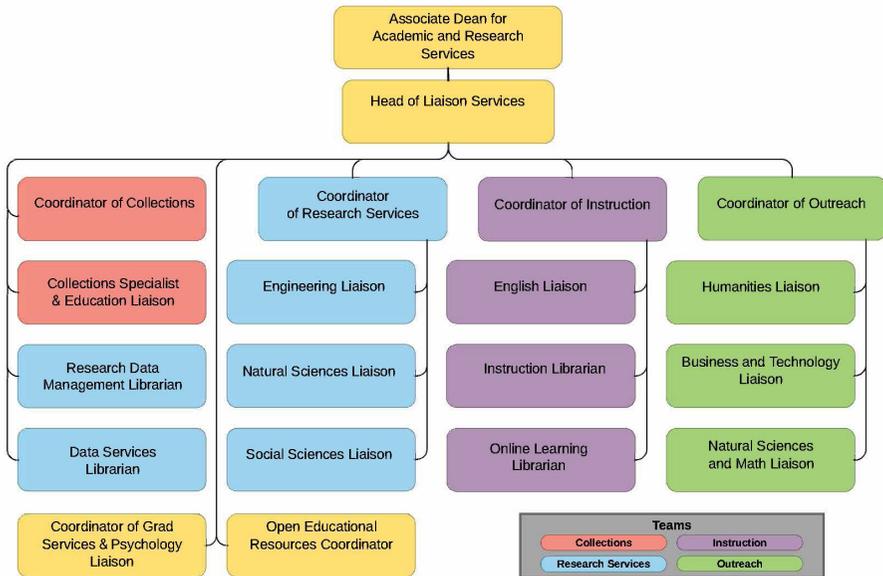
much to say about “transformational leadership” (Martin, 2016; Phillips, 2014; Hicks & Given, 2013) but often fails to take into account the great importance of supervisory competence and experience. It lacks the balance that Kotter recommends between the critical leadership skills necessary for change management and the managerial skills necessary to execute that change.

Middle management has been referred to as the space where leadership abilities meet supervisory experience and responsibilities (Farrell, 2014b). Librarians in these roles learn to manage direct reports, execute administrative priorities, and promote department or program-level vision (Chang & Bright, 2012). They develop leadership and managerial skills and learn how to balance both within their institution. This case study addresses the targeted development of middle management opportunities for liaison librarians within a departmental structure. As supervising coordinators, liaisons at the UH Libraries develop both the managerial and leadership skills needed to prepare them for success in middle management roles and potential career advancement opportunities in library administration.

### *UH Libraries Liaison Services’ Structure*

In July 2017, the UH Libraries Liaison Services department embarked on a significant restructuring. Prior to this date, the department was co-led by two heads—one for research support and collections, the other for instruction and outreach—who supervised liaison librarians and functional specialists. An opportunity was created in 2012 for the coordinator of undergraduate instruction and outreach to supervise two librarians, which in turn created the department’s first, and only, functional team. This proved to be a valuable developmental experience for the coordinator, a former liaison, who, up until that point, possessed leadership experience but not managerial experience. It also served as an early model for the functional team structure the department ultimately adopted.

Upon the departure of both department heads, a department of eighteen librarians was deemed too large for one person to supervise. A need for increased engagement with university research initiatives and an evolving approach to collections also influenced the need for a redesign. Discussions with existing department members revealed a desire on the part of some liaison librarians for new leadership opportunities. With this in mind, a new structure was created. The former coordinator of undergraduate instruction and outreach was promoted to department head. In this role, she directly supervises six coordinators and three librarians, is responsible for providing vision and strategic leadership for the department, and oversees departmental personnel management. Each coordinator is, in turn, responsible for a functional area essential to the success of the department. The research services, instruction, and outreach coordinators, all former liaison librarians, each supervise a small team of librarians.



**FIGURE 4.1.** University of Houston Libraries organizational chart

The design of this structure (see figure 4.1) was based on the strengths of the librarians in the department at the time. It provided some liaison librarians with an opportunity to gain supervisory experience through the coordination and management of teams. The following section details why this structure is beneficial to the supervising coordinators, department, and library, as well as how it can serve as a model for other libraries seeking to build supervisory paths for liaison librarians.

## Merging Leadership with Management

As previously mentioned, liaison librarians have numerous opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills within their existing job roles and service commitments. But for those interested in moving into administrative positions, the supervising coordinator structure gives them the managerial experience necessary to advance their careers. They can do so without leaving their home institution, developing new supervisory skills within a familiar organizational culture. UH Libraries, like many other academic libraries, has few management positions available for mid-career librarians interested in advancement. The model created within Liaison Services

offers an opportunity for librarians interested in gaining management experience to pursue this experience without leaving the library. They are able to leverage their leadership skills and existing relationships both on campus and within the libraries. They know enough about the organizational culture to understand the decision-making context, who to ask for help when needed, and how policies and strategies have been previously applied. The coordinator of outreach, having been at the library for four years at the time of the restructuring, came into the role already aware of existing campus community outreach needs, which allowed for faster development of team priorities. She was also able to identify customized supervisory strategies more quickly because of her familiarity with the librarians she managed. In addition, the research services coordinator was able to leverage pre-existing knowledge of library colleagues to identify a management mentor outside the department. Understanding institutional culture is a huge benefit to new supervisors who inherit a steep learning curve when assuming managerial responsibilities.

The UH Liaison Services structure provides supervising coordinators with a smaller, more supportive environment in which to learn the day-to-day realities of management. Carol Walker suggests new managers frequently “fail to grasp how their roles have changed—that their jobs are no longer about personal achievement but instead about enabling others to achieve” and that this failure leads to insecurity which erodes former high-trust relationships (2002, para. 3). The Liaison Services structure takes Walker’s suggestion into consideration and allows each supervising coordinator to lead a small team rather than an entire department and learn personnel management strategies with the support of a department head and a small cohort of supervising peers. New supervisors make mistakes, but the support structures in place within Liaison Services help mitigate the impact of those mishaps and maintain a learning environment. For example, throughout the annual performance review process, the new supervisor may have questions about logistics and effective feedback strategies. The department head can provide guidance on how to structure and write performance reviews, providing an accurate representation of a librarian’s work aligned with library human resources structures. She can also coach the new supervisor on how to deliver feedback and how to prepare for performance review discussions with direct reports. While any supervisor can research how best to handle supervision, the authors have found it incredibly valuable to have an opportunity to discuss confidential matters with an experienced supervisor.

In addition to the mentorship and guidance that a department head provides, having a cohort of supervising coordinators, as developed in the UH Liaison Services department model, provides a community where both peer-learning and moral support exist. The cohort prevents the isolation that is commonly experienced when people move into managerial positions (Zumaeta, 2019). It creates a safe space for confidential exploration of different management strategies, personnel challenges, moments of imposter syndrome, and strategies for managing up. In doing so, the

coordinators are building foundational management skills that are essential to preparing them for future leadership roles. The supervising coordinators within Liaison Services hold an informal monthly meeting outside the confines of the office. It is, in part, a social gathering, where coordinators are as likely to share experiences of job stress as they are to discuss weekend plans. This sharing of experiences sets a foundation of trust that discloses the vulnerabilities of supervising coordinators, allowing them to learn from each other and explore their supervising identities.

Through this community and the experience of supervising a small team, the supervising coordinators have the opportunity to explore whether they want to continue on a supervisory path. The opportunity to reflect on the supervisory identity and experiences, within the supportive departmental infrastructure, encourages informed decision-making about subsequent career steps. Some individuals may decide to step away from supervisory responsibilities, others may want to continue as a supervising coordinator, while others may pursue increasingly responsible job roles. For example, the current department head of Liaison Services spent five years as a supervising coordinator, where she enjoyed the challenge of combining leadership with personnel management. This inspired her decision to pursue the role of department head. If a supervising coordinator decides to step away from supervising, the departmental structure enables an easier transition back to a liaison librarian or a non-supervisory program coordinator role.

## Succession Planning in a Learning Organization

The supervising coordinator model offers tangible career benefits to liaisons who transition to this role, and it also has a positive impact on the organization overall. The UH Libraries strives to foster a culture of learning, professional development, and continuous improvement, and as a consequence, invests considerable resources in its librarians. Within this learning-centered organization, significant time is needed to onboard, mentor, and develop new librarians within the library's culture (and allow the culture to be shaped by them). By promoting liaison librarians to supervising coordinator roles, the library retains individuals in whom they have significantly invested both time and professional development resources. These librarians possess institutional knowledge and existing relationships that help further the priorities of the library. They are high performers who would otherwise look for career advancement opportunities at another organization but are staying within the UH Libraries to gain valuable supervisory experience. Should higher-level supervisory roles become available within the library, there are more well-qualified internal candidates who can step into these positions. As libraries that employ early-career

professionals struggle with employee retention or recruiting appropriate external candidates for leadership roles, this model provides a way of mitigating this problem.

Familiarity and experience with the library's organizational culture are advantageous to the supervising coordinators who must then enculturate members of their team and support their professional development. This work takes time and many conversations between supervisor and librarian. By dispersing the supervisory responsibilities among the coordinators, this model alleviates some of the individual mentoring and coaching demand on the department head. The department head instead invests her time in developing the supervising coordinators' abilities to coach and mentor their direct reports. In turn, the supervising coordinators are able to coach the librarians they supervise. More time is taken for informal one-on-one conversations that build connection, morale, and a deeper understanding of the work of the liaison. This leads to a greater sense of connection for the liaison to their supervisor than would be possible if the department head supervised the entire department. Research indicates that a strong, healthy relationship with one's supervisor creates a sense of connection to the organization and contributes to the overall wellbeing of the employee (Nohria, Groysberg, & Lee, 2008, p. 80). A stronger connection to the liaison's work also enables the supervising coordinator to better advocate for the work and the value of the librarians they supervise. A major responsibility for any supervisor is onboarding new employees. The supervising coordinator structure ensures more available time for in-depth onboarding of new employees. This helps foster a better understanding of the departmental and library cultures, the nuances of the job responsibilities, and strategies for success in the profession and at UH Libraries. All of this benefits the department as each individual has more customized support from their supervisor, thereby strengthening and sustaining a culture of learning.

This practice of peer-learning also takes place at the departmental supervisory level. The coordinators learn from each other, but also contribute to a supervisory culture of critical questioning and reflection. As the supervising coordinators have gained experience with the management aspects of their roles, they have interrogated and examined topics as varied as human resource policies, departmental norms, and management decisions. Through ensuing discussion and reflection, the department head and supervisors consider the rationale for existing procedures and policy applications, how they align with espoused departmental values, and if they could benefit from revision. It also ensures that all supervisors in the department have a shared, complete understanding of policies and strategies, enabling more effective and consistent application. This creates a stable departmental culture rooted in shared understanding, equity, and fairness. Consequently, the department head is better situated to advocate for the department, its people, and broader structural change at the administrative level. In short, it sets up an ideal foundation for the kind of leadership needed in libraries.

# Facilitating Depth and Breadth of Knowledge

From this foundation of learning and shared managerial responsibilities, the UH Libraries' Liaison Services department is better able to develop services and expertise essential to collaborative liaison work. Under the leadership of supervising coordinators, members of the functional teams build in-depth, specialized knowledge within their respective areas (outreach, research services, and instruction). This creates a team with a breadth of skills, abilities, and expertise that is responsive to emerging community needs. Each team of "in-house experts" is then able to lead professional development for the department, resulting in a cadre of liaisons that possess both a specific skill set and broad capabilities across several functional areas necessary for campus engagement. The department's administrative structure facilitates an alignment of strategy across the functional areas. The department head, supervising coordinators, and non-supervising coordinators work together to create a unified leadership vision for the department. However, it is the supervisory structure that enables the day-to-day work that makes the vision a reality. Unlike other structures that give coordinators responsibility without authority, the Liaison Services department ensures the success of its initiatives by enabling coordinators to manage both programs and people.

The skills that supervising coordinators use to coach and mentor liaisons are often the same skills that the supervising coordinators use to successfully lead their teams. The time spent strengthening supervisory skills becomes beneficial for leading teams in activities such as identity-formation, motivating people, project management, and big-picture thinking. These same skills are also beneficial to other coordinators for peer-learning. Big-picture thinking is not a skill which liaisons have been called on to develop, although this is changing as libraries align ever more with their parent organizations. Coaching liaisons in developing this skill can be a challenge for a new supervisor. Since teams also need to develop big-picture thinking, a similar skill set can be employed to successfully encourage this kind of thinking in team planning and prioritizing. Learning to motivate people is another challenging area for new supervisors. Motivating an individual involves very similar skills, such as connecting individual desires to strategic priorities, communicating how the individual's efforts will contribute to the achievement of broader goals, and motivating that individual and several others at the team level. When coaching a liaison through a professional development plan to grow their skills in a particular area, the supervising coordinator uses project management skills to help the liaison develop and discuss the plan. These same project management skills are immensely helpful in team leadership, priority decision-making, and the execution of those priorities. Overall, the management skills which the supervising coordinator learns at the individual level can be effectively adapted for the team leader level to benefit the team and the department.

## Limitations of this Model

The supervising coordinator model was developed out of a very specific context within the Liaison Services department at UH Libraries. It is heavily reliant on the learning culture detailed in the previous section. It also requires a department head invested in the professional development of supervising coordinators and supervising coordinators who are willing to engage in a learning experience rooted in sharing power and authority. For this to happen, there must be mutual respect and trust between the department head and coordinators. Without this understanding, the model is unlikely to be successful.

This model is best applied within a large organization that has a significant number of experienced liaisons interested in pursuing supervisory roles; however, it can be adapted by smaller organizations. The creation of an assistant department head is an alternative way to provide a managerial path for interested liaisons in smaller organizations or departments (Gits, 2008). The roles of both the supervising coordinator and assistant department head rely on traditional hierarchical organizational models and may not be applicable in libraries with flat structures, such as those that employ department chairs or those that function in a unionized environment.

Adding a layer of hierarchy within the Liaison Services department has presented some specific communications challenges. Consistent and effective communication across supervisory lines requires diligence and significant effort. Effectively communicating the work of the department, the coordinators, the teams, and individual liaisons across the department requires strategy, infrastructure, and significant time investment from the supervisors. For example, it can be challenging for the department head to maintain a balance between the creation of meaningful connections with liaisons through conversations, which can understandably lead to situations where the liaison asks for coaching or advice from the department head, and respecting the role of the supervising coordinators through ensuring that liaisons feel comfortable seeking coaching from their supervisor as well as the department head.

A final but important consideration is that this model has been in place for less than two years, and it has already evolved since its initial implementation: coordinator positions were both created and dissolved in response to specific needs, departmental departures necessitated team reconfiguration, and team membership shifted as each team created its priorities and identity. Thus, a coordinator of open educational resources was created in response to an emerging campus priority. With the departure of a coordinator from the Research Services team, the role was transformed into a research data management librarian position, the graduate services coordinator moved out of the Research Services team to focus on more cross-team collaborations, and the English librarian traded teams with the engineering librarian in response to changing campus priorities and departmental staffing. With the dynamic nature of higher education and liaison work, the flexible team-based structure will likely undergo more change as departmental and library priorities shift.

Other factors that would influence the future evolution of this model include the departure of any of the current supervising coordinators or the department head, the creation of new positions, or the hiring and onboarding of new librarians.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the UH Libraries' Liaison Services model, it nevertheless provides liaisons with a viable path toward leadership roles. It represents one way to prepare the next generation of library leaders in ensuring that they have the necessary skill set to be both visionary leaders and competent managers. This model applies the existing skills of liaison librarians, who are strong collaborators, communicators, and mentors, to the responsibilities of supervision. It provides an opportunity to develop the managerial competencies that will position them to be more qualified candidates for middle management positions and eventually higher-level administrative roles. Models like this one help the profession engage in succession planning and keep the work of the library moving forward in times of organizational change or shifts in personnel. For libraries looking to disperse the responsibilities of management and create a cohort of librarians ready to take on that challenge, a similar model would lay the foundation for that succession planning as well as personnel development. Finally, as libraries continue to evolve, the need for competent, experienced supervisors and leaders will always remain, so libraries must take steps to ensure their librarians can take on these roles and contribute to organizational success.

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