

## *Managing by the Book . . . \**

### **Learning to Lead: Debunking Leadership Myths\*\***

Jean M. Holcomb\*\*\*

*Readers of strategic planning documents seldom expect to find radical manifestos. Yet, in placing such an emphasis on leadership training for law librarians, the creators of the AALL 2005–2010 Strategic Directions document boldly challenge law librarians to address a series of commonly held myths about leadership.*

¶1 When you look in the mirror in the morning, do you see a leader?

¶2 While a vision of donning the mantle of leadership probably isn't the first thing that most law librarians contemplate each morning, our professional association clearly has begun to think in just those terms. On June 15, 2005, Victoria Trotta, the president of the American Association of Law Libraries, announced the availability of the Association's latest strategic planning document to the membership.<sup>1</sup> The 2005–2010 Strategic Directions summarizes the strategies that will be the focus for the Association's efforts over the next five years and identifies three goal areas: leadership, education, and advocacy.<sup>2</sup>

¶3 From the perspective of the cross section of the Association's membership involved in the strategic planning process, acquiring leadership skills will be critical for law librarians. They believe that for law librarians to receive the recognition and esteem due them as experts in legal information, research, and technology, law librarians must increase their abilities to "position themselves as essential to the mission of their organizations."<sup>3</sup> Plan drafters identified objectives to support the goal of developing the leadership skills of AALL members, including providing leadership training opportunities.

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\* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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\*\*\* Law Librarian and Director, King County Law Library, Seattle, Washington.

1. Press Release, American Association of Law Libraries, From the Desk of Victoria K. Trotta, AALL President: AALL Strategic Directions Plan (June 15, 2005), available at [http://www.aallnet.org/press/ftdo\\_victoria\\_trotta\\_061505.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/press/ftdo_victoria_trotta_061505.asp).

2. Am. Ass'n of Law Libraries, 2005–2010 Strategic Directions (2005), available at [http://www.aallnet.org/press/AALL\\_2005\\_SD.pdf](http://www.aallnet.org/press/AALL_2005_SD.pdf).

3. *Id.*

the drafters of the AALL 2005–2010 Strategic Directions document boldly challenge a series of commonly held myths about leadership. By casting leadership as a critical skill for all members to possess, the Association issues a challenge to each member to confront both cultural and personal beliefs about leadership.

¶5 For example, one commonly expressed belief holds that leaders are born, not made. Another myth suggests that only extroverts need apply for leadership status. You're also probably familiar with the "heroic figure" myth, the story of the larger-than-life, commanding figure who never exhibits self-doubt. There's also the "not in my job description" theory that defines leadership as the sole prerogative of the boss. Another widely held view portrays leaders as those folks with the arrows in their backs, out in front in dangerous territory. And what about the perception that leaders, alone at the top of their organizational pyramid, don't have any fun?

¶6 Faced with the existence of so many beliefs about leadership that have less than positive connotations, where can a law librarian interested in acquiring new leadership skills or polishing existing ones turn for help?

¶7 Michael Feiner provides a good starting place for those seeking common-sense rebuttals to the negative myths about leadership in *The Feiner Points of Leadership: The Fifty Basic Laws That will Make People Want to Perform Better for You*.<sup>4</sup> The author's career spans time spent in leadership roles in large corporations, as a management consultant, and as an instructor in a graduate business program. He writes in the post-Enron climate to call attention to practical, plain-speaking strategies for solving the everyday problems leaders face.

¶8 Feiner organizes his book into four specific parts. The introductory chapters define leadership and draw distinctions between management and leadership skills. The second part focuses on relational leadership situations, describing the different skills needed to lead subordinates, to lead bosses, to lead teams, and to lead peers. The themes uniting the chapters in the third part of the book center on situation-specific leadership settings: leading conflict, leading change, and leading difference. The fourth segment of the book discusses values-based leadership skills.

¶9 Feiner's use of the term "laws" throughout the book to denote his key principles may initially prove disconcerting for a legal audience. Yet, the non-stuffy voice of the author and his use of the first-person narrative device in the stories that illustrate his laws help bridge the initial confusion that describing all leadership principles as laws engenders in the reader.

¶10 The book concludes with a multipage matrix designed as a cross-reference tool to lead readers to specific solutions for common leadership problems. Feiner identifies challenging situations and pairs each with the appropriate laws that he believes will provide guidance. He offers leadership principles for dealing with a

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4. MICHAEL FEINER, *THE FEINER POINTS OF LEADERSHIP: THE FIFTY BASIC LAWS THAT WILL MAKE PEOPLE WANT TO PERFORM BETTER FOR YOU* (2004).

subordinate who is not performing up to expectations, a boss who is indecisive, a discouraged and worn-out team, and distrustful peers. He suggests principles for dealing with friction and rivalry within a team, and includes strategies for situations when people seem resistant to changes that have been announced.

¶11 Feiner believes that all organizations face enormous pressure to be productive and efficient. In the face of such pressure, effective leaders “regardless of where they reside in the organizational hierarchy, make organizations more fulfilling and more fun—yes, even fun—for their subordinates, their bosses, and their colleagues.”<sup>5</sup> The theme that holds all of Feiner’s principles together is his belief that a leader’s personal value system plays the critical role in motivating, galvanizing, and energizing people to achieve great results without “breaking the law, without cooking the books, and without violating people’s need for dignity and respect.”<sup>6</sup>

¶12 While breaking the law or cooking the books might not be high on the worry list of law librarians, the importance of dealing with others in a manner that reflects dignity and respect goes to the heart of the service ethic that drives law librarianship as a profession. For Feiner, 90% of great leadership hides below the surface. Leadership isn’t about fiery oratory or heroic example. Great leadership centers on skills related to managing relationships through direct communication.

¶13 Feiner doesn’t promise that acquiring great leadership skills will be easy. He believes that the mastery of leadership skills lies in an understanding of the laws of leadership that he outlines. To understand the taxonomy of his principles, it’s helpful to get a sense of his perspectives about the differences between management and leadership.

¶14 Feiner draws clear distinctions between management skills and leadership skills. He defines the former as skills that center on functions such as planning, budgeting, resource allocation, and problem solving, reflective of a career spent in human resource management. He suggests that management skills lend themselves more easily to being taught, quantified, and communicated than do leadership skills.<sup>7</sup>

¶15 Leadership skills, centered on values and human connections, focus on relationship building, coaching, feedback, and communication.<sup>8</sup> The short-term results of competent management produce order, consistency, and predictability for an organization. Leadership, on the other hand, creates change and adaptability.<sup>9</sup>

¶16 Feiner sees change as the leadership component that gives rise to all of the myths and unease about leadership. Our normal response to the threat of change and to the possibility of the unknown, Feiner believes, drives us to seek safety in order, consistency, and predictability—to see safety in management skills alone.

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5. *Id.* at xiv.

6. *Id.* at xv.

7. *Id.* at 18.

8. *Id.* at 28.

9. *Id.* at 29.

The challenge for individuals and their organizations is to resist the pull of predictability. Only by employing a balance of management and leadership skills will individuals and organizations prosper.<sup>10</sup>

¶17 Within this framework, Feiner turns his attention to detailing his leadership laws. He clearly believes that leadership traits can be learned. His focus on the opportunities for an individual to exercise leadership within the organization regardless of their title or position of authority provides the heart of his leadership myth-breaking model.

¶18 His principles of relational leadership demonstrate strategies to help each of us step up to the challenge of leadership. Each of the workplace relationships exemplifies a philosophical approach or underlying message. With a subordinate, a leader conveys a “you count” message. With a boss, the leader’s approach says, “I’m committed to you.” With a team, the message becomes “we’re in this together.” With peers, leaders send a message that says, “I’m here to earn your trust.”<sup>11</sup>

¶19 From all of the laws described by Feiner, the law of the emperor’s wardrobe offers insight both to the author’s own mind-set and to how his principles come into play in the workplace. Based on the Hans Christian Andersen story of the “Emperor’s New Clothes,” this law illustrates how to preserve your self-esteem and your integrity by telling your boss that you don’t agree or that there’s a serious problem with a plan the boss supports. While recognizing that telling the emperor he has no clothes could have scary consequences for the bearer of the message, Feiner outlines how to provide feedback or, as he defines it, “push-back” in a way that opens the issue at point to a discussion that generates helpful information for the decision maker.<sup>12</sup>

¶20 Because almost everyone has a boss, the other six principles about leading bosses that Feiner describes also ring true. When he outlines three underlying truths about leading bosses, he provides a foundation for this aspect of leadership that resonates.

- In this world you don’t get to pick your boss.
- Leaders aren’t victims, so while they might not be happy with the behavior of their boss, they work to figure out what they can do to change the relationship to get more of what they need and less of what they don’t want.
- People join good organizations, but leave bad ones. “Research in corporate management shows that the quality of the relationship with the boss has the biggest impact on employee tenure—more than any other factor, including pay.”<sup>13</sup>

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10. *Id.* at 163. Feiner is not alone in the world of management and leadership theory in defining the need for leaders to be skilled at utilizing a variety of techniques. Daniel Goleman describes research that indicates that leaders with the best results don’t rely on only one leadership style, but use most of the six recognized leadership styles in a given week flowing seamlessly between styles as the situation being addressed demands. See Daniel Goleman, *Leadership that Gets Results*, HARV. BUS. REV., Mar.–Apr. 2000, at 78, 78–79.

11. FEINER, *supra* note 4, at 148.

12. *Id.* at 80.

13. *Id.* at 91.

¶21 By now you may be thinking that Feiner's points might make sense in the corporate world, but won't translate well to the way law libraries function as organizations. Yet, the library literature—from the editorial columns in *Library Journal* to specific treatments of leadership in the workplace in *Law Library Journal*—suggests that the principles he defines fit any organization regardless of the industry or the fundamental nature of the service provided.<sup>14</sup>

¶22 While it's true that Feiner's story focuses solely on the role of employees' leadership responsibilities and opportunities within their organizations, his common-sense approach to leadership makes it possible to bring his principles into play in leadership roles outside the organization. Our law libraries all function within a broader environment. Whether we have as a parent organization a law school, law firm, or court, law librarians will find opportunities for putting to use the roles defined by Feiner for leading conflict, leading change, and leading difference and diversity.

¶23 On a personal level, what can each of us do now to become the leaders our Strategic Directions document envisions?

¶24 We can initiate our personal leadership development program in a number of no- or low-cost ways. Look for books on leadership and management in the business section of your local public or university library. Check the curriculum offerings of local community colleges for leadership and management classes. Don't overlook the in-house training programs offered by our parent organizations that focus on key management, leadership, and communication skills for their employees.

¶25 Volunteer to be part of a project led by an individual with acknowledged leadership skills to get a firsthand opportunity to observe and model leadership behaviors. Seek an opportunity to develop leadership skills by assuming a leadership role in a work-related project or in a project with a community organization or law library professional association. Find a leadership mentor who will be willing to help you identify leadership opportunities and will also be willing to provide coaching tips.

¶26 If these suggestions don't sound very enticing, look for leadership models from popular culture. Reality television from Donald Trump to *Survivor* offers vivid depictions of the good, the bad, and the ugly side of leadership. Dissecting the antics of bad bosses from Scrooge<sup>15</sup> to the lead character in *The Devil Wears Prada*<sup>16</sup> provides opportunities to learn what *not* to do in the workplace as a leader.

¶27 Take to heart the message from Michael Feiner that acquiring and polishing leadership skills brings benefits to both the individual and the organization. Embrace the leadership challenge by looking in your mirror and finding the outline of a leader. Prepare for the benefits that leadership brings in terms of personal

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14. For a parallel discussion of the leadership dynamics employed with the boss written by a law librarian, see Janis L. Johnston, *Managing the Boss*, 89 *LAW LIBR. J.* 21 (1997).

15. CHARLES DICKENS, *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (Lippincott 1976) (1843).

16. LAUREN WEISBERGER, *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA* (2003).

growth, job satisfaction, and the opportunity to inspire others. And stay tuned for more details about how the AALL 2005–2010 Strategic Directions Plan will be implemented in the leadership goal area.