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Prince or Plebe?: Success at All Levels of the Library Hierarchy

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PRINCE OR PLEBE?: Success at All Levels of the Library Hierarchy

Introduction

Regardless of where you fall in the hierarchy at your library, you probably report to somebody. Somebody who may not see eye-to-eye with you on the value of attending conferences, the importance of a devoted teen librarian, or the need for embedded librarians in every department. We are not the ones who have ultimate authority and probably want more power than we currently have.

We do, however, have control over ourselves, our reactions, and our behavior. We exert a quiet influence over the coworkers we interact with, even if we don't formally supervise any of them. And with some Machiavellian foresight and planning, we can successfully advance our own interests—and win the support of the highest members of our library administrations in the process.

No, this doesn't mean that you need to bump off anyone in the chain of command between you and the director. "Although it is true that both beloved leaders and despots have used Machiavelli as a guide, his legacy tends to be thought of as malevolent. [...] His political philosophy was not evil in itself. It was just extremely realistic" (Montgomery and Cook, 2005).

Malevolent or realistic: you decide.

THE PRINCE – Success as a Supervisor

Lead by Example

"A wise prince [...] should never be idle in times of peace but should industriously lay up stores of which to avail himself in times of adversity so that when Fortune abandons him he may be prepared to resist her blows."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The greatest influence you ever exert may be unconsciously wielded: what are your subordinates taking away from your leadership style? Are they writing notes on what you do right or tweeting about how unfair you are?

I've made it a personal goal to not ask anything of my subordinates that I'm not willing to actually do myself, and I follow through on this so they can see that I mean it. One-on-one appointments with the most longwinded of patrons? Check. Cordoning off a leaky toilet in the public restroom? Check.

I also try not to gossip or say anything negative about our library system or coworkers. Regardless of whether I think a particular policy is out-of-touch, it simply isn't professional to communicate those views down the food chain; it tacitly gives your subordinates permission to act the same way. I never want to be a manager who has a "Do as I say, not as I do" leadership modus operandi!

The end result of leading by example, I feel, is an innate trust and respect that is intrinsically rewarding and practical as well. All managers have been in a situation where only limited pieces of a story can be disseminated to front-line employees, which often causes frustration. Frustration is less likely to occur when your employees know that you have faced the same issues as them by working on the front lines.

Mentor Promising Employees

"Therefore the best fortress is to be found in the love of the people, for although you may have fortresses they will not save you if you are hated by the people."
― Niccolò Macchiavelli, *The Prince*

While you should, of course, strive to have a positive relationship with all your subordinates and coworkers, special attention should be paid to those who show exceptional interest or drive. They are the ones who have the most potential to advance inside your library and outside in the field, and are also the most likely to be receptive to any advice you may have.

Taking extra care with these employees is a win-win-win: your library benefits from all the wonderful ideas your employees have, they are more likely to advance with your encouragement, and you have happier employees. Your guidance may be particularly appreciated if you see a subordinate's wings being clipped. You can share what political navigation strategies have worked best for you, and hopefully prevent that employee's morale from sinking, which would possibly lead to decreased productivity and eventual ship-jumping (Abram, November 28, 2012).

It is also extremely rewarding to put one's experience and hard-earned wisdom to use. There's no need for others to learn the hard way if it can be avoided. Finally, Signor Machiavelli would find me remiss if I neglected to mention the possibility of a current subordinate being promoted above oneself. Inspire loyalty now while you can.

Be Passionate About Your Ideas

"Entrepreneurs are simply those who understand that there is little difference between obstacle and opportunity and are able to turn both to their advantage."
― Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

You can't expect others to get on board with an idea if you're not excited yourself. What motivation do they have? This is a good guideline for any supervisor to keep in mind, but it is especially a solid guideline for those who would like to lead as well as manage. You will be your own best example of the attitude that is possible for your subordinates to accomplish.

I have been told by colleagues who previously had no interest in management that working with me has inspired them to seek out their own management opportunities. Before we worked together, they saw management as simply handling irksome personnel issues and filling out paperwork. I truly enjoy resolving crises and guiding my coworkers' professional development, however, and think to this day that this is one of the highest professional compliments I have ever received. I like to think that I have inspired greater involvement in ALA and our state association in my colleagues because of my own genuine enthusiasm (and, dare I say, near-evangelical zeal) for them.

THE POLITICIAN – Success as an Employee

Excel in the Job that You Were Hired For

"And you have to understand this, that a prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

"For however strong you may be in respect of your army, it is essential that in entering a new Province you should have the good will of its inhabitants."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

You may have aspirations of becoming a library director one day, or be bursting with great ideas. However, if you do not do the job you were hired for, you will gain very little support for those ideas. It is always a bad idea to come into a job—especially if you're new to the library and weren't hired from within—and to immediately start complaining about how inefficient, uninspired, or nonsensical current services are, or to talk about how great things were at your previous libraries/how you would change things. While all this may be true, your coworkers—and more importantly, your supervisors—will likely feel annoyed that you haven't taken the time to understand the politics and history of your current workplace. Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, all libraries are unique in their own ways, and you may make others impatient if you do not recognize that what may be a no-brainer for a large research institution is unfeasibly expensive for a small liberal arts college. Additionally, your idea may have already been tried and failed for an excellent reason.

You will be taken much more seriously in all you do if you take the time to establish yourself as not just a competent but an outstanding employee. This will prove to your supervisors and administration that you are aware of what it takes to be successful in your particular institution. You are also more likely to be granted leeway—to work on projects yourself, to be active in ALA, or whatever is currently not the norm at your institution—if you have proven yourself. When I was hired into one job, for example, my active involvement with ALA and conferences worried some colleagues because of the time commitment. There was concern that I would not be able to handle my quotidian responsibilities if I continued my involvement. I stayed active, but made an effort to prove that I could efficiently handle all of my current responsibilities. This resulted not only in my participation being smiled upon, but also a favorable view of my efforts to involve my coworkers, as well. Remember that, in most cases, you are not being paid to present at IFLA or even to develop an amazing Teen Advisory Board from scratch. Working on such projects should only happen once your core job responsibilities have been fulfilled.

Once you are aware of the politics and history of an idea at your institution, you will be able to propose change in a way that acknowledges these politics and history and demonstrates how your application would be different. See "How to Propose an Idea in a Way that Will Get Administrative Buy-in," below, for a detailed description of how to propose ideas to your administration.

Find a Mentor

"A wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men, and to imitate those who have been supreme, so that if his ability does not equal theirs, at least it will savor of it."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Be on the lookout for potential institutional mentors as soon as you start a new job. Get the lay of the land first, though. You want to avoid being associated with colleagues who are universally frowned upon or have a questionable history. Ideally, an institutional mentor is someone in a more senior position, who has a good understanding of the political landscape of your particular library. This can be a direct supervisor, but be aware that other factors may cloud a supervisor-subordinate mentorship and prevent it from reaching its full potential (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2008).

You don't even have to formally enter a mentoring relationship in order to benefit. Simply finding a role model within your institution and modeling your behavior after that person's can be helpful. Your mentor obviously has some Machiavellian instincts in order to have advanced. If you can, ask his/her advice on how to best navigate your library's political waters. Most importantly, observe how your mentor behaves when interacting with superiors, peers, and subordinates, and act similarly.

Persevere When Told 'No'

"And let it be noted that there is no more delicate matter to take in hand, nor more dangerous to conduct, nor more doubtful in its success, than to set up as a leader in the introduction of changes."
― Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Just because an idea or request doesn't work right now doesn't mean it won't work in the future. Perhaps the person who received your pitch wasn't in a good mood. Or perhaps you pitched it to the wrong person or not in the right way. Don't lose hope. Do your research. Get the advice of your mentor. Bide your time. Pitch it again, choosing your audience and your moment. As Braun states, "'No' can often turn into 'yes' " (March 27, 2013).

Find the Joy in Your Job and Coworkers

"Therefore a wise prince ought to adopt such a course that his citizens will always in every sort and kind of circumstance have need of the state and of him, and then he will always find them faithful."
― Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

When you are bursting with ideas about all of the things you'd like to do for your library but keep getting told "no," it can be frustrating. Don't dwell on the negative, though; that will only cause a downward spiral that won't be good for you personally or professionally. As Stephen Abram says, "Make no mistake, if you're negative, you end up contributing to the workplace problem culture instead of being part of the solution. The future starts to look dark instead of bright and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (November 1, 2012).

While you may wish for more, it is likely that there are aspects of your job that you do enjoy: an excellent rapport with your coworkers or a truly inspirational director. Focusing on the positive aspects of your job will keep your morale up and make you less vulnerable prey to malcontented gossip. Your supervisors and administrators will also be more willing to listen to your ideas if you are coming from a place of constructiveness rather than discontent.

Develop and Maintain a Network of Like-Minded People

"Choose wise men for your advisors, and allow only them the liberty of speaking the truth to the prince, and only on matters about which you ask, and nothing else. But you should question them about everything, listen patiently to their opinions, then form your own conclusions later."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Networking can provide another morale-booster. You may feel at times like you are the only person at your library who is interested in speaking at conferences or developing a Teen Advisory Board, for instance. You may be right, but you are definitely not the only librarian in the profession who is interested in these things. Make some professional friends through your outlets: tweet, join the ALA Think Tank, volunteer for your state library association. You are guaranteed to find others who have the same interests as you, and you can commiserate and brainstorm with them.

Some of your new contacts may also feel stifled or underappreciated. Ask them about their coping strategies. Remember that "wishing gets you nowhere. Doing builds muscle and skills. And once you're there there's more ahead to develop and grow. You are not alone" (Abram, November 1, 2012). Your network will act as a built-in support group when things are rough, and you can dream and work on fun projects with them until you are able to do the same thing at your day job as well.

THE CIVIL SERVANT – Success as a Subordinate

How to Propose an Idea in a Way that Will Get Administrative Buy-In

"But while it was their opportunities that made these men fortunate, it was their own merit that enabled them to recognize these opportunities and turn them to account, to the glory and prosperity of their country."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

"When they depend upon their own resources and can employ force, they seldom fail. Hence it comes that all armed Prophets have been victorious, and all unarmed Prophets have been destroyed."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

We have all had the experience of receiving a stroke of brilliance, only to have it summarily rejected by a superior, perhaps before it has even been reviewed. What's the roadblock? How can you get your ideas the attention they deserve?

The most important thing to realize is that managers are busy people. They don't necessarily have time to discuss all their concerns with you. Rejecting the proposal out-of-hand is more expedient. If you present your idea in a way that acknowledges the demands on their time, they are more likely to read your proposal and thereby be persuaded. The worst thing you can do is bring up a problem without offering a solution. That route can be perceived as a lack of respect for your manager's time (Trikha 2013).

The proposal format that has worked best for me has been cribbed from library director Elisabeth Doucett's book, *What They Don't Teach You in Library School*. Luckily for you, the

salient bits have been reprinted online in the *American Libraries Magazine* as tip 8 in the article "10 Tips for Tracking Trends" (2010). As she explains, "What you are doing here is compiling the most essential points for decision makers so they have the information they need to review an idea and decide whether it has merit. […] Your goal is to demonstrate that you have thought through the implications of pursuing this idea, both positive (the value to your library) and negative (cost and resources)." Your manager will thank you for saving his/her time and it's good for you to think through all the positives and negatives of your idea.

Learn and Take to Heart Your Library's Mission

"He will be successful who directs his actions according to the spirit of the times, and that he whose actions do not accord with the times will not be successful."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The most politically astute libraries align their own missions with those of their parent organizations, whether they serve a university or local government. The parent organization will be held responsible for—and therefore cares about—fulfilling its own mission. Teaching unemployed people to use computers so they can apply for jobs and professors about copyright so they avoid accidental infringement are indeed noble objectives, but libraries are unlikely to find budgetary support for such initiatives unless they are tied to the goals of their funders. For better or for worse, "When people use the word politics, they are often talking about who is in control. Issues of control and power are an integral part of politics" (Montgomery and Cook, 2005). Your task is to deal with those politics in a productive way.

My own library director is a master of strategic alignment. Each of our library's goals references one of the county's overarching objectives. Notedly, our goals are not simply nominal nods to our county's strategic plan. We have truly taken the county's mission to heart, and our strategic plan reflects that support of the county's aspirations. As a result, our library is taken more seriously and enjoys a higher regard than it had previously.

Set Realistic Goals and Create a Plan for Reaching Them

"The wish to acquire is no doubt a natural and common sentiment, and when men attempt things within their power, they will always be praised rather than blamed. But when they persist in attempts that are beyond their power, mishaps and blame ensue."
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Goals keep you motivated. Yet, unrealistic goals just make you frustrated, while goals that are too small are insufficiently inspirational. While it is not impossible, it is extremely improbable that you will be a library director before the age of 30, or that you will change the way libraries lend e-books. Setting your heart on something improbable will only lead to disappointment. The trick is to find the happy medium: "personally attainable. Just a hair out of reach. Enough to make you stretch but not too far that it seems unreasonable to keep going when it gets tough" (Abram, November 1, 2012)." Then, make a plan for reaching that goal.

I, for example, decided that I wanted to be an ALA Emerging Leader several years ago. I spoke with several people who were alumni of the program to get their perspective on what the selection panel looks for in the applications. I explained my desire to participate in the program

to my supervisors, who agreed to write recommendation letters for me. I carefully crafted my application and had others proofread it for me. And the end result is that I was accepted into this selective program on the first try. Remember that Machiavelli himself, as influential as he was, was never the eponymous prince, nor could he be: he made the most of the avenues open to him.

Recommendations & Conclusion

Recommendation #1: Be the Boss You Wish You Had
- Don't ask your reports to do anything you aren't willing to do yourself
- Be active in supporting your employees' professional aspirations
- Be passionate about your ideas, and support for them will come from the ground-up, rather than needing to be mandated from top-down

Recommendation #2: Don't Give Up on Hoping or Trying
- Learn the lay of the land before offering suggestions or criticism
- Figure out what makes you happy and focus on those aspects of your job
- Find people you can lean on and others you want to emulate

Recommendation #3: Act Like a Star Employee, Think Like Your Boss
- Be strategic and respect the demands on your supervisor's and administration's time when proposing an idea
- Understand that even your administrators have to report to someone and go through the same approval process as you
- "Express interest in and be ready to discuss big-picture library issues" (Braun, March 27, 2013)

Regardless of how static you may feel your current situation to be, you do have the ability to effect change in your own life, your workplace, and in the profession. It does take work, however, as most great things do. Set goals. Find other people who keep you motivated. Hold onto your passion. And "every day, in every way, ask [yourself] the key question that transforms a middle manager into a CEO: 'What would Machiavelli do?' " (Bing 2008).

Additional Resources

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