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Column Title: Leadership Reflections

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This column illuminates aspects of academic library leadership through careful and candid reflection. The aspiration is two-fold: to support leaders throughout their journeys and to positively impact the culture of our libraries so that we thrive. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor at falconea1@nku.edu.

Gratitude at Work

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Leadership, gratitude, appreciation, support, and culture.

Abstract

Guest columnist Ginger H. Williams is a new dean at Fort Hays State University, a regional comprehensive university in western Kansas. Ginger reflects on aspects of her work she is grateful for, such as a challenging renovation project and other new-to-her duties that help expand her skills. She also considers the many people whose support she relies upon. Readers are encouraged to consider what they are grateful for in their own professional lives and to find ways to express gratitude in a professional setting.

As I write this, the air is getting colder, winter holidays are approaching, and taking stock of what we appreciate in our lives seems appropriate. In my personal life, there is no doubt I have a lot to be thankful for. Every day, I am surrounded by friends and family who love me. I feel

welcomed by and involved in my community. My family is healthy and happy. I have creative outlets. I get to see the beautiful western Kansas sunrise each morning. There is so much good fortune in my life that I almost feel embarrassed sharing it. As a new library dean, I'm learning about gratitude. About a year ago, I became the library dean at Fort Hays State University's Forsyth Library, which is a library with 18 employees with both faculty and staff. My team includes tenure-track faculty, non-tenure track faculty, and faculty classified as program specialists, and it is my first time supervising in a union environment. We are in the thick of planning the first comprehensive renovation to the 1967 facility. The team has anticipated the renovation for years now and they have so many good ideas we are trying to incorporate. I can say with confidence that I get to help lead a skilled and dedicated team. They have so far been receptive to my collaborative leadership style, and I am quite happy to be on this journey together with them.

At Work

The word 'gratitude' dates back to around 1513 A.D. (OED Online, 2022). Although we use the word casually, the definition implies much more depth than just saying thank you. From the OED, gratitude is "The quality or condition of being grateful; a warm sense of appreciation of kindness received, involving a feeling of goodwill towards the benefactor and a desire to do something in return; gratefulness." In a professional setting, it seems we aren't as open with one another about feelings of gratitude. If you think about the feelings of warmth and goodwill described above, it makes some sense that we guard such sentiments from our colleagues because we don't want to appear or feel vulnerable. Perhaps we don't want to make them uncomfortable by breaking some unwritten convention.

However, there are plenty of ways to show gratitude at work that are socially acceptable. Those warm feelings of appreciation, the desire to help people who have shown you kindness, and I encourage you to act on them by letting people know how much their work impacts the mission of the library and how well the academic community is served by their efforts. Find ways to share that appreciation at the university – to the library administration, academic affairs leadership, or wherever appropriate. Let your team know you trust them and are proud of their work by avoiding micromanaging, finding more opportunities to say yes, and singing their praises.

I recently had the privilege of going through a program called “Your Leadership Edge” with the Kansas Leadership Center, and one of the (brilliant) teachers shared a technique that included giving kudos to one another at each meeting. Any member of the staff can give a compliment or say thanks to another for something that has happened since the last meeting. It turned out to be a popular and genuine time for sharing. We have tried that at the end of an all-staff meeting in my current library, too. These typically happen monthly, and we hold them face-to-face in our large meeting room. When we took a moment to share kudos, it seemed that most of the initial skepticism gave way to positive feelings and appreciation. It’s something I need to remember to save more time for, because it has a much bigger impact than the general sharing of information that typically happens during the all-staff meeting.

The concept of expressing thanks and gratitude in the workplace isn’t abundant in the library literature. Is it something we’re wary of as members of a pink-collar profession? If you’re not familiar with this term, pink collar jobs are “any positions women have traditionally held, [such as] teachers, secretaries, nurses and childcare workers” (Korpar, 2022). As a woman in a

leadership position, it frustrates me to waste time wondering if expressing gratitude does me some social harm in a work setting. But this concern is not unfounded; research shows that “in many cultures, women are expected to express certain emotions [including gratitude] more frequently compared with men” (Kashdan et al., 2009, p. 694). Perhaps the act of demonstrating thanks to my colleagues and my team, then, serves to remind them of ways in which I demonstrate traditionally feminine qualities—running counter to or pervasive to the perception of leadership as a masculine activity (Sumra, 2022, p. 4). Perhaps my strength is my willingness to be vulnerable, even if I risk looking weak. My personal strength is not nearly as important as that of the organization’s and our ability to work productively together to do something greater than we could without one another.

I want to be an authentic and inclusive leader for my organization, and I find myself more uncomfortable with the thought of keeping feelings of gratitude to myself than I am with sharing them. At least one study has shown that when we hold feelings of gratitude towards an organization, such as a university, we are more likely to demonstrate positive behaviors towards it (Ford et al., 2017, p. 186). There are so many people and opportunities I am grateful for within my organization that I can’t help but want to reciprocate in positive and supportive ways.

Although I am under a year into my role as dean, I can say I have felt nothing but support. Both the President and Provost have encouraged and supported me in a number of ways. Neither is shy about expressing their authentic thanks and appreciation when they feel it is earned. I am encouraged by their emails, notes, and public words of support to keep leading authentically and acknowledged for exercising thoughtful, strong leadership.

This is such a contrast to an environment from very early in my career in which I had no idea I was valued or appreciated until I put in my notice that I was moving on. Although it was not a leadership role, I had not felt any freedom to grow or experiment or learn in that position. It led me to go in search of a job that would be more supportive. Nothing in the organizational culture told me we were a team or that our work was valued. My colleagues and I all seemed to keep our heads down and get our work done. In the few years I was there, I can't remember a celebration of any kind or even a meeting that included the whole team. If you listen to much country music, you'll know a common theme is how going through rough times helps you appreciate the good things you have in your life. I am glad to have moved on from settings where I didn't feel support, and now, getting positive feedback from my leadership is only one of many parts of my job that makes me feel gratitude.

Supporting Professional Growth

I am grateful for the work I get to do. The projects I get to be engaged in are energizing and challenging. I have always sought positions in which the duties stretch my knowledge and skills. Now as dean, for example, the most substantive project I get to pursue currently is starting a complete renovation of the library of a 105,000 square foot building originally constructed in 1967. It will take roughly three years to execute this phased renovation while we still occupy parts of the three story, square, fortress-like building. I have been included in the architect selection process and in developing the program document used to describe the scope and specific requirements of the project. I've gotten to give presentations to stakeholders such as the FHSU Board of Trustees and the FHSU Alumni Association Board about the project and even gave remarks at a press conference with US Senator Jerry Moran (FHSU University

Communications, 2022). It is invigorating and difficult work. It is technical at times, and at others it is entirely centered around managing people and navigating expectations. In 2026, if all goes well, I will have the pleasure of planning my first ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The other projects I am involved in stretch me and help me learn, too. I am contributing to policy development for flexible work arrangements that will impact employees throughout the organization. This is the first position I've held with such substantive budget authority, and it is a challenge to learn to be the best steward I can of the library's finances. Cultivating relationships with donors has also been an enjoyable but entirely new challenge. The more opportunities I get that help me learn and grow, the more I recognize my role in creating and supporting similar opportunities for those I manage. In some cases that means encouraging more professional development and in others it's asking for help managing projects such as leading development of our next strategic plan. I look forward to getting to know my team better and working with them to identify more growth opportunities.

I am grateful for the support I feel throughout my organization. I can say with confidence that I am supported by the President and Provost. They tell me as much and send hand-written notes to say thanks after a big event. I am also grateful to have the support of the Foundation CEO and the Library's Director of Development. We have been partnering with them more and more to host events like a reception for the University's General Scholarship donors and recipients and a meet-and-greet for Alumni Award winners. We love having these events in our library spaces and the Foundation staff make everything so easy on us when we're planning or holding the events. Thanks to this partnership, I have gotten more opportunities to develop my public

speaking than I could easily count. I feel welcomed and respected by the other deans and the vice presidents. From the beginning of my time at Fort Hays, they have included me in projects and opportunities, such as inviting me to participate on teams relevant to the library and scholarly information. They have tried to get to know me as a person and ask me about my family. There are other members of the Senior Leadership Team¹ I know I can trust for some sound advice, but as a newer person within the organization it's also just nice to have someone to get coffee with from time-to-time. I feel grateful for the support of the library faculty and staff. I feel support from everyone at this institution—that they are rooting for me, and for the library.

I am grateful for far-flung colleagues who have always been willing to be peer mentors, collaborators, and friends. I have needed my mentoring network at each stage of my career, but as I have progressed into management positions the ability to connect with someone outside of my organization who experiences similar challenges is essential. Being able to support those colleagues when they need me is rewarding, too. Not only do we help each other through challenges, we have fun together. These are the friends who I look forward to meeting with regularly when we are working on a project together and the ones I want to spend time with at conferences. Having the friendship and help of my peer mentors makes my work so much more enjoyable because I never feel like I am alone. This is one of many reasons I will always support my team's participation on state and national committees and attendances at conferences whenever possible. We all need a strong network to be supported by and in turn, to actively support.

¹ Senior Leadership Team serves in a consultative and coordinative role to the executive leadership team. Meetings are led by the University President and includes executive leadership, associate provost, deans, chief communications officer, athletic director, director of facilities planning, CIO, general counsel, governmental relations officer, assistant vice president for student affairs/enrollment management.

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My Leadership Edges

The Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) training I recently received encouraged me to consider leadership to be an activity and contemplate how I can actively push the edges of my comfort zone. I'm thankful that I had this opportunity, and I would highly recommend attending a KLC workshop (anyone can attend online). If you want to test the waters, read *Your Leadership Edge: Lead Anytime, Anywhere*, by Ed O'Malley and Amanda Cebula. Your "leadership edge" is the place where you have the chance to engage beyond what you find familiar to make meaningful progress. As O'Malley and Cebula say in the book, "if you want to make progress on a really big challenge—or if you want change to happen faster or last longer—you'll need to push beyond what's comfortable" (2015, p. 86). I am grateful to have joined my library at a time of major change as we have begun planning for a full-scale renovation of our aging facility. It is a project that has been anticipated for many years and is finally coming to fruition. I think designing a library the team and the campus will be proud of and well-served by is indeed a *really big challenge!* What an incredible opportunity to learn more about myself as a leader.

Throughout the KLC workshop, we broke into small groups to discuss how ideas could be implemented. The renovation project was always front of mind as I considered each group question, such as where my comfort zone ends and my edges begin, what other interpretations of the challenge my colleagues might hold, and how I might act experimentally to make progress on the challenge at hand. The activities and discussions helped me identify a number of skills at my edges that I'd like develop further.

Two of the edges I feel a need to push against are initiating difficult conversations, especially if they are corrective in nature, and having the bravery to try things that might be unsuccessful. I suppose I am in good company dreading the former since “most managers find this type of feedback the hardest to give, and some put it off out of discomfort” (Green & Hauser, 2012, p. 128). For whatever reason, many of the people I’ve worked with have tended to trust me with their problems. Hopefully that means that I’m a good listener and they know I will at least keep their secrets safe. Better yet, I hope it means they have a feeling that I can help in some way. As good of a listener as I can be, though, I need to work on being the one willing to initiate a conversation that may stir up emotions we try to avoid: feeling defensive, embarrassed, or even angry. If I have a clear idea of how I can help offer direction, I am more able to lean into the discomfort and have the discussion that needs to be had. When I need guidance, I sometimes talk to my peer mentors about how they approach similar situations. I am fortunate to have a supervisor who’s willing to think through difficult situations and conversations with me, too, without seeing it as a weakness. At times I may re-read chapters from *Managing to Change the World*, a management book I continue recommending to new and experienced managers alike for its practicality. My copy opens naturally to the pages about giving corrective feedback. Similarly, it’s easiest to engage in a project when I already feel confident about my ability to accomplish it. Something I’ve done before with success, something I’m especially familiar with, or something with very well-developed expectations and structure leading to the finish line (think tenure evaluations). Those kinds of projects can feel like they initiate themselves, because I can see the beginning, middle, and end clearly. I can put on *Glassworks*², my getting-things-done soundtrack, and push up my sleeves. But in the end, the projects that are less defined and

² *Glassworks* by Philip Glass, 1982.

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require me to develop new skills are the ones that end up being the most rewarding. I try framing those as the opportunities they are and keep an open mind about how the work will be accomplished, letting it change along the way. In these cases, I am likely to seek creative ways of understanding the work by sketching out ideas, outlining them, or making some other visual model to help think through the process at hand. What a loss it would be to get stuck with the knowledge and skills I have right now for the rest of my career—I want to keep growing and leading in ways that benefit my organization. I find it hard to argue against pushing those boundaries when my team will benefit, and ultimately I will feel greater satisfaction.

Try Gratitude

The research about gratitude in the workplace emphasizes the organizational benefits associated with expressing gratitude, such as combatting burnout (Kersten et al., 2022, p. 143) and encouraging helping behaviors (Nowak & Roch, 2007, p. 608) among colleagues. It's proven to be worthwhile in a number of ways. If expressing gratitude at work is something on your leadership edges, I want to convince you that pushing yourself in that direction is worth a try. You have very little to lose and your organization, and your colleagues, have a lot to gain. They may be willing to try pushing their edges with you. If you find yourself needing more support, reach out to peers in your professional network to ask how they have shown gratitude at work. Leaders know when to push their own edges, and they know when to encourage others to do the same. Demonstrating gratitude is one way of building a culture where employees thrive.

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