

Children's Librarians: Management Gurus of Librarianship?

by Mel Burton

A dead-end job is how some have referred to children's librarianship because the perception is that those working in that area don't have much skill in management. Will Manley in his March 1998 column in *American Libraries* stated that there is a strong feeling that "children's services are a ticket to oblivion. This is based upon the assumption that those who choose to work with children do so because they themselves are children and simply could not deal with the stressful demands of management."¹ I experienced the lack of faith in the management skills of children's librarians when I investigated an available library director's job some years back and was told by the acting director that candidates with a strong children's services background would not be seriously considered. While, of course, the status of children's librarianship varies from one location to another, there seems to be some validity to the opinion of some library administrations that children's services staff are not the management equal of other department staffs within the library.

The irony of the less-than-impressive evaluations of the management ability of children's services staff is that fulfilling the job requirements should provide these librarians with the skills to adopt many cutting-edge management ideas. Manley states that there is no better preparation for management than serving children; "if you can manage kids, you can manage anything." Other job requirements also well prepare children's librarians for management positions. Ads for children's librarian positions request traits or abilities such as creativity, energy, exuberance, ability to work with various ages, sense of humor, capacity to plan and enact programs, written and oral communication skills, and storytelling. These abilities common to children's librarians are also sought for management positions.

Being active or energetic and communicating with other employees prepares a person to fulfill an idea proposed in *In Search of Excellence*: MBWA, or management by wandering around.² This means simply moving around and talking to people. The authors state that the value of MBWA is that you're accessible and there to listen, it helps keep

employees informed, and it's fun.

Storytelling has long been associated with the job of children's librarian. The storyteller draws the audience into an intriguing plot with well-described scenes and lively characters. Storytelling is used to lead children to books and reading and in many areas of the world to pass on the culture of the community. If storytelling has been effective in passing on mores of various peoples, then storytelling can also be effective in passing on the corporate culture. David Armstrong promotes this use of storytelling in his 1992 publication, *Managing by Storying Around*.³ Armstrong believes that storytelling is the best form of training, gives recognition by including employee names in the stories, empowers people, is more memorable, and is fun. If you want to let a new employee know the preferred conduct, tell the person a story about how another employee gave great service to a customer.

Some recent management literature has stressed empowerment or being a self starter. Children's librarians have to change what they are doing continually, often in midstream, to do what will work best. They also envision and implement new projects. Taking charge when needed and starting new programs is second nature to many children's librarians.

If the job that children's librarians do is examined thoroughly, I believe it would be concluded that children's librarians are well suited to being managers. Will those with an opposing view take the time to study the skills of children's librarians and notice that match

with what is required of managers? Only time will tell, but mistaken stereotypes die hard.

References

- ¹ Manley, Will. "Theories on the Disappearance of Children's Librarians," *American Libraries*, 29, 3 (March 1998): 128.
- ² Peters, Thomas. *In Search of Excellence*. NY: Warner Books, 1993.
- ³ Armstrong, David M. *Managing by Storying Around*. Three Rivers, MI: D.M. Armstrong, 1992.

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