Advancing Chinese American Leadership in Library Field

Wendy Tan
Head of Cataloging
Hunter College Waxler Library, The City University of New York
695 Park Avenue, New York City

Abstract

There is substantial amount of Chinese American librarians in the United States, and they may be excellent workers, but very few of them have thrived to hold leadership positions. What made them fail to make to the top? This could be a complicated and sensitive question, and there may have a variety of reasons. Very objectively, the author dissects possible factors according to basic elements of leadership -- creative visions, good communication, and enthusiasm to examine the issue. After all, the leadership is a reachable goal, but Chinese American librarians have to be active to pursue this role.

Keywords: Leadership, Librarianship, Chinese American Librarian

Leadership Roles and Chinese American Librarians

The advent of electronic frontier has propelled the information retrieval systems to the next millennium even before the arrival of year 2000. Consequently, librarians -- gatekeepers of information service -- view this fast change with excitement as well as anxiety. Because of technological developments, our services to library patrons have been rendered more efficiently and effectively, but on the other hand, questions have also arisen concerning librarians' capabilities to deliver quality services. Since these concerns have generated numerous discussions in many journal articles, my focus in this article is steered clear of that crowded sky.
As a Chinese American librarian, I am very concerned about the professional growth of this minority group in the modern society. To serve in any of American libraries, we undoubtedly possess competitive library skills and knowledge along with required credentials like our fellow American librarians. Therefore, my interest is not drawn upon this area. One aspect of Chinese American librarianship that has not been discussed, but in some respects is paramount, is the rare presence of leadership.

The notion that United States is a place of equal opportunity to all citizens is well supported by historical documents. Nevertheless, when it comes to career opportunities and job markets, many minorities can not help wondering why there seem to be so many inequalities.

Like many other professions, library field has been very reluctant to open up its leadership ranks to Chinese Americans. My analysis* shows that a great amount of Chinese American librarians working at academic libraries and public libraries, but only a small fraction of them have emerged to assume leadership (highest) positions in their institutions. Although my assumption may not be accurate, I think we will all benefit if we care to look into this matter and find ways to improve ourselves for better tomorrow.

Minority Leaders’ Strengths

What are the reasons for the presumed situation that Chinese American librarians are under represented in leadership roles? In many people’s minds, racial prejudice may come handy as an answer. In fact, it is impossible to have a straight answer to this kind of question, and no conclusion could be made without causing some controversies. However, after having attended a few lectures on the subject of minority leadership in the United States, I gained a better understanding about such a complex issue, and I want to share some insights with my fellow Chinese American librarians.

While attending those lectures, I had the privilege of meeting a hand-

---

*Based on Chinese American Librarians Association membership, 1997-1998.
ful of minorities that have thrived as true leaders in their respective
disciplines and listening to their stories of how they climbed their career
ladders. Certainly, their outstanding credentials and top-notch job per-
formance are the foundation of their success. Besides, what are other quali-
fications, which empowered them to be distinctive competitors in
their fields?

There were two common grounds which I felt those speakers shared
in their characteristics throughout their lectures.

First, they took initiative to cultivate their own creative thinking, not
only for themselves, but also for other members of the team. Meanwhile,
they also showed their determination to pursue their goals once set to see
end results. From this strength alone, I could tell that each speaker must
be a coach and player of his/her own life, and this is what the leadership is
about.

Second, those speakers demonstrated their impressive power of
communications. They could express and convey the information to their
target audience with firm tone, and the messages they delivered were di-
rect, precise and powerful. Furthermore, such awesome display of confi-
dence and assertiveness also reflected an equally impressive command of
English. Even more phenomenal was the fact that a number of these
speakers learned English as a second language.

It goes without saying that you must have what it takes to be a leader.
If the incorporation of the above-mentioned strengths and knowledge is
the key to success regardless of the race and gender, it is not an uneasy
task to analyze some major roadblocks, which may have made corporate
ladder so narrow for Chinese American librarians.

Possible Factors for Chinese American Librarians’
Obstacles

Traditionally, Chinese culture tends to nurture followers not leaders,
and to a great extent molds Chinese people’s personalities. The teaching
of Confucius, for example, was emphasized on benevolence instead of
competition, and Lao-Tzu, the founder of Taoism, taught us to be passive
and submissive to nature. These teachings have become Chinese philos-
ophy as well as codes of good conducts since thousands of years ago.

It came no surprise to know that Chinese adults instruct their offspring to be respectful to elders and obey superiors whatsoever, and expressing personal opinions freely is not considered as a good behavior and discouraged very strongly by parents and teachers. Parents have a total authority over any decisions made by their children, and in a normal situation youngsters don’t have the audacity to formulate their own opinions. This cultural tradition seems to provide some explanations for why general impressions of Chinese young people are inaudible, quietness and passiveness, and, according to some child psychologists, this sort of personality will remain unchanged through their adult lives supposing they don’t make attempts to alter it.

Although it is very true that such tradition has slowly effaced by modern American culture, there are still a significant amount of Chinese Americans brought up under the influence of old Chinese culture. From my personal perspective, the great disadvantages for an individual with rooted Chinese background are his/her inability to communicate effectively and lack of incentives to venture on new ideas and explore new trails. When it comes to employment for leadership posts, I think candidates with above characteristics would have difficulties in getting favorable considerations by any rational.

In addition to the points I enumerated, another essential component for leadership lacking in Chinese Americans is the motivation and commitment to taking on challenges. An effective leadership involves planning, organizing, coordinating, and execution, and it takes practices and numerous failures before the fruits of success can be reached. To many Chinese Americans, working hard to achieve the objectives may not be an issue, but skills of dealing with problem solving and frustrations along the way are extremely insufficient in the training. More often than not, this weakness is the barrier on the path to becoming a successful leader. As far as I know, quite a few Chinese American librarians have been the cog of the wheel in the operations of their libraries, but they were very intimidated to take on a driver’s seat, because they didn’t want to face the mistakes which may occur under their direction.
Leadership Acquisition in Information Age

The fabric of our society has always been held strongly together by a multi cultural heritage where we all can share each other's strengths as well as weaknesses. It is my belief that our place in the society and in the professional world is determined by our individual qualities not by our skin pigment. I am quite convinced that America has always striven to promote and maintain the racial equality, which this nation has built upon.

The world keeps changing, and this is particularly true in the information world. What impacts will the fast movement have on the way we serve our library patrons? Meanwhile, as information specialists, what will the future hold for us? I believe the only certainty about the future is uncertainty, and the reason for this conclusion is crystal clear. With this understanding, upgrading our perception toward what we can do to better prepare ourselves for tough challenges would be a wise step to take while the going seems still reasonably calm and steady.

We, all Chinese American librarians, have to let go the grip of the past, try to fight the status quo and arm ourselves with creative visions, effective communication skill, courage, and perseverance to get on the path of leadership in our field, because, judging from many predictions, only leaders may be the fittest to ride with future trend. We may not have impressive experiences in taking risks or challenges in our resume, but a past failure is not necessarily a blockage for future success as long as we don't have fear of failure. My reflection on the remark one of those lecturers made about her learning process of leadership is that the best way to learn to lead is by doing it—by taking challenges to serve in leadership roles, making mistakes, learning from mistakes, and having the courage to stay on the same path to strike back at appropriate time.

While racism may exist in the United States, this is indeed a land full of opportunities and allowing talented and determined minorities to succeed. Differences will be made if we are able, ready and willing to give it a shot, and the choice is ours.
References
