CHAPTER 22

Frustration, Exhaustion, Determination: Why I’m Not Backing Down from Library Leadership

Emily Mitchell

Introduction

As assistant library director for technology—currently at an urban public library, though all my previous librarian experience was in academia—I’m not kidding when I say I’m exhausted right now. In part, I’m exhausted from the past year and a half of showing up to work during political and social upheaval so I could constantly reinvent the library to meet the demands of a global pandemic. This has very much been over eighteen months of helping to create new policies and workflows from scratch to keep staff safe while shouldering the bulk of the responsibility for the technological changes needed to support different staffing models and workflows. I have written funding requests to get laptops and filming equipment so staff could work from home; re-networked parts of every branch so that our new people counters would work; investigated, purchased, implemented, written documentation for, and troubleshooting more unfamiliar pieces of technology than I care to remember; moved staff and public computers around each branch (more networking changes!) to support social distancing; you name it. And that’s on top of everything else:
the weekly two-plus-hour meetings where library leadership got together to identify the latest challenges and figure out how to meet them; being one of the people called out to the frontline to address the library users who won’t follow mask policies; planning the technology budget for the coming year; keeping track of the bills that kept the internet on and the regular computer leases paid up; making sure the website accurately reflects our ever-changing policies; addressing staffing challenges anytime someone calls out sick or takes a last-minute personal day; monitoring the IT ticket queue to make sure every issue is dealt with; helping the department heads who report to me navigate quirky town policies in the midst of a global pandemic; dealing with personnel issues; and so on and so forth.

So yes, that’s feeding into my exhaustion. In part, though, I’m exhausted from my dozen years of librarian experience in which it was continuously made clear to me that most of the world doesn’t know or care what librarians (and library staff!) do, let alone value it, and too often library leadership ignores, perpetuates, or exacerbates issues. The symptom of this that has become my pet peeve lately is every social media meme about libraries that raves about all the free stuff we offer (books! movies! Wi-Fi! printing!) but never thinks to mention the librarians and staff members who make it all happen, usually on a shoestring budget, while also answering just about any question you throw at them.

I am exhausted despite all the advantages handed to me by the level of privilege I live with. I am, after all, an able-bodied, cis/het, neurotypical, white woman from an educated, upper-middle-class background working in a field dominated by people who look and sound an awful lot like me. There are so many things I can take for granted just because of what I look like; if this were a game, I’d be playing on one of the easiest settings. So, if I’m exhausted, it doesn’t feel like much of a stretch to assume that just about everyone working in libraries is exhausted right now.

One of the things my exhaustion has made clear to me is the level of anger and frustration I’ve built up over my time in libraries. I just don’t have the energy left to pretend anymore. I’m angry at the power structures libraries exist in, and the ones within the library are just as bad. I am livid that so many library leaders allow or commit so much harm to the people working in libraries. I wouldn’t have phrased it so strongly in the pre-COVID times, back when I took so many things for granted and hadn’t spent eighteen-plus months living and working through what sometimes seems like a dystopian novel. But I was feeling it even then; it’s the main reason I’m in library management. I never really wanted to be a manager, but I cannot just stand by and watch bad things happen to the people around me.

My journey to this point has included a lot of happenstance. I never intended to have a career in libraries at all, to be honest, let alone one in library leadership. When I was sixteen, I swore that all librarians were evil and I would never join their ranks. Here’s how that went down:

*Scene:* It’s my first-ever performance review at my first-ever job. I’m a library page at the local public library and my review is being held at the reference desk during open hours, while patrons browse the stacks around us. My manager proceeds to tell me that I don’t shelve enough books and I
need to be faster. I have not previously been spoken to about this, and I feel humiliated by the public setting.

My first-ever performance review, and it had to be with a manager who didn’t just surprise me with a negative review, they surprised me with a negative review in public. That’s a double-whammy of management worst practices—nicely setting up my first library manager as one of my early negative role models.

I avoided librarians for years after that, but the librarian life lured me in anyway because at the end of undergrad I had no idea what else to do with my life. Several people told me I would be great as a librarian, and I figured it would pay the bills. So, I leveraged my bent for technology to become first an educational technology and reference librarian, then a webmaster librarian, and then a coordinator of library technology, all in mid-sized college/university libraries. I was shocked to find out that I really loved working in libraries. I love having a job in support of everyone’s lifelong learning. I believe in community and the power of combining interdisciplinary and diverse perspectives to better understand the world. I love wandering the stacks of an academic library, wide-eyed at all the weird, fascinating, boring, ridiculous things out there that someone can become an expert on. I love the moment when the perfect (or perfectly wrong) search term brings up results that I never expected. I love helping other people find the information they need, whether it’s at the reference desk or indirectly, behind the scenes.

I stumbled into loving librarianship, and I had the immense good fortune to be on the tenure track from the start. I achieved tenure during my stint as a coordinator and thought that I’d maybe stay at that level or try a different librarian specialty in a few years, if or when I got bored. That’s when life threw me a curveball: my then-partner needed to move suddenly to another state, and I didn’t want our relationship to be long distance. I gave up my tenured position and took a job as assistant director for technology at an urban public library in another state. Public libraries weren’t particularly something I ever felt called to, and ultimately I expect to return to academia. In the meantime, though, I needed a job, and here was one that matched my skill set nicely. Yes, public libraries aren’t really where I want to be, but I definitely did want to be with my partner. If I have to choose between tenure and being happy with my life outside of work, I’m going to choose the latter every time.

The bird’s-eye view of my career path shows me as having been exceedingly fortunate. Straight into a full-time, tenure-track job as a fresh MLS graduate in the heart of the Great Recession? Straight from one job to the next, rarely with even a hiccup in the transition? It was all only made possible by the fact that I was able to move repeatedly to states where I had no connections in order to accept the job. I’ve also been fortunate enough to find friends and mentors at every step of my career along the way. That, too, can be taken as another sign of my privilege.

Even while I was cruising along to tenure and beyond, though—even with all the privilege I walked in with—I still experienced, observed, or heard about seemingly endless times when library management or leadership abused their power. Here are some particularly formative examples, starting with memorable supervisors (not all mine, thankfully):
Scene: A committee is evaluating candidates for promotion and tenure. A manager is up for tenure. He has a history of referring to multiple colleagues’ same-sex partners as their “roommates” or “friends” and once spent a staff party reminiscing publicly about the good old days when all the women wore skirts to work. He refuses to learn how Google Forms work even though they are used often in his job; others always have to make the forms for him (even after he’s been given step-by-step directions created specifically for him). He has a history of taking credit for work that he has asked others to perform for him. He receives tenure and continues, unchanged, in his role as a manager.

Scene: Most faculty and staff at this college come from the state the college is located in. A middle manager from another state has decided they hate it here, but they aren’t ready to leave yet. They constantly tell “jokes” belittling people from the state we’re in. No one lower in the library hierarchy feels comfortable asking this person to stop, and no one higher in the hierarchy seems to notice. The middle manager continues making such jokes for several years until they leave to take a promotion at another college.

Scene: It’s my first full year in a position. As part of the library’s annual review process, every untenured librarian receives a written evaluation from the coordinators in charge of each of the librarian’s areas of responsibility: reference, collection development, instruction, etc. One coordinator, who has ignored me all year, writes me an evaluation that is a mix of them accusing me of being terrible and them saying that they don’t even know what I’ve done all year. The evaluation surprises me because the coordinator never reached out to me about my work or anything else. I have documentation proving that I have met every benchmark in this coordinator’s domain. I express concern to the review committee that this written evaluation will cause problems for me. “No, don’t worry about it,” the committee members tell me. “We all know how [that coordinator] is; you’re fine.” The coordinator continues, unchanged, in their job until they retire years later.

Scene: A non-librarian staff member has been promoted to second in command of their department—the highest level a non-librarian can reach. The librarian overseeing the department offers no support and, in fact, makes things harder for the staff member because the librarian doesn’t perform their own job duties. The staff member blames themself for the shortcomings of the department and spends several months as an emotional wreck. The librarian faces no consequences.
Scene: It’s the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. No one knows yet how the disease spreads or whether you can catch it from touching library books returned by someone who’s sick. Vaccines and treatments for COVID are still nothing more than a dream for the future. My email inbox is full of listserv messages where library leadership is bragging about how they’re not letting the pandemic get in the way of service to their communities—they’re fully open, thank you very much. Off the official listservs, I keep hearing reports from library frontline employees across the country about how many of their number have caught COVID so far and how rarely they see anyone from the admin suite in the building, let alone interacting with patrons.

These supervisors taught me the kind of supervisor I didn’t want to answer to—and ultimately also what I didn’t want to become when I joined the ranks of management. It’s true that some of them had other, positive traits that I’ve tried to add to my bag of tricks. Overall, though, these were the managers who left me wondering why they were allowed to stay in power. And these things just keep happening. Talk to almost any library employee or lurk on non-official libraryland social media accounts and you’ll hear story after story: library employees belittled, bullied, or ignored by the very managers who are supposed to support them. Colleagues ending up in tears because they’ve been shoved into untenable situations and left there with no help in sight. Library workers thrust into unsafe situations on the frontline of a pandemic because library management/leadership places a higher value on getting books to patrons than they do on the lives of their colleagues.

The thing is, I know the temptation was real and strong to keep libraries open even during the worst of the pandemic. I know it because this was one of the ways that the pandemic highlighted how even the people who “love libraries” don’t necessarily spare a thought for library workers. How many letters did my library receive from people who “love the library” but couldn’t understand why we were “depriving” them by keeping our doors shut for months? (We were staffing contactless pickup at the same time that many of these “library lovers” were still working entirely remotely, so if they had a phone or an internet connection, my sympathy is nonexistent.)

All the time during this pandemic that my library stuck with any service model less than allowing patrons into the library, we’ve grappled with the fear that our budget would be cut in retaliation. In my experience, most libraries exist in a system where some non-library group controls their budget, what faculty/staff positions have lines they’re allowed to fill, and more. On college campuses, the college even controls the library building. A lack of understanding of what we do can easily couple with a lack of caring about what we need to do it; that’s how you get situations like these:

Scene: Librarian offices are scattered around the library, leaving librarians isolated from each other and making collaboration difficult. One of the few good staff areas for sharing information and building relationships with coworkers is a room that has five offices that all open into it. Employees have chipped in to put a mini-fridge in the shared area. Informal conversations
often happen in this space, and it serves as a backup meeting room when the only staff meeting room is already in use. One day, the college informs the library that they will be moving a non-library department into that space, and this is non-negotiable. A few weeks later, librarians no longer have access to the space.

**Scene:** The library director asks the librarians at a meeting if we’ve all filled out a faculty survey the college sent out. “What survey?” we all say because we haven’t received one. The college has forgotten yet again that librarians are faculty members here; we weren’t included in the email.

**Scene:** I’m in another meeting where we discuss how we’re going to manage our collections budget given that the library budget has remained flat for no-one-can-remember-how-many-years-now. Database and journal costs are rising. Inflation is real. We’ll have to cut some subscriptions even though it will alienate the departments that are the heaviest users of those resources. No one at our meeting actually believes that those departments will learn to plan ahead far enough to use interlibrary loan to meet their needs. We are reducing our offerings and our users will almost certainly blame us for it.

**Scene:** A supervisory position is open, and the library has received special permission to hire for it despite an ongoing hiring freeze. A current employee has been doing that job on top of their own, even though they’re not being compensated for the extra work. They apply for the position when they get the chance. The current employee makes it to the final round of interviews. All interviews are over when HR informs everyone, with no explanation, that the position is no longer going to be filled. The employee doing the work still is not being compensated for it.

**Scene:** I am about to formally take on additional responsibilities at work; my internal job title is going to change. I’m going to be middle-management! People outside of academia ask me if that means I’m getting a raise. I have to explain that because my external job title was and remains senior assistant librarian, there is no process that will allow me to receive increased base pay. Because I asked forcefully (and because my position gives me a lot of informal power in the library), I will receive a small additional stipend that won’t count toward base; the stipend I receive won’t factor into cost-of-living salary increases and can be taken away at any time. I accept it because it’s better than nothing and there is no pathway to request more from the college.
I’ve seen entirely too many instances where librarians were treated as less important than other faculty or staff or were forgotten about entirely. I’ve seen too many instances where the money just wasn’t there to let us do things the right way. And how many librarians actually get paid a fair salary given the level of education required for the job? I could go on, ranting about colleges that spend their money on seemingly anything but updating the library building, important committees librarians are never asked or permitted to join, and so much more. I could tell you about the ridiculous things that professors have asked me for. The funniest is the one who honestly believed that as a librarian it was my job to write a textbook for their course. But it’s more typical to run into professors who can’t be bothered to learn the copyright around course reserves and chew you out when you can’t put that article they ILLed on e-reserve for them. I could tell you about the pros who went to school someplace with very niche library collections and assumed every library would be able to make those identical resources available to them, assigning the most incredible homework to undergrads who were all stressed and upset at the reference desk when they found out that their homework was impossible with our library’s collection.

But what it really comes back to, for me, is all the managers who told me I should just accept the way things are. The ones who never taught me that that professor had no right to browbeat me over their course reserves. The managers who based my assessments on reviews from faculty members, even though those faculty members weren’t interested in what I was allowed to offer them and I wasn’t allowed to offer them what they actually wanted. The managers who ridiculed their supervisees because they could. The library administrators who told us that if we want to do our jobs properly, we should expect to come in early, stay late, and show up on our days off. The bullies who were given power and allowed to keep it without consequence. The pushovers who somehow made it to library leadership and then failed to ever make the library or its needs and values known at the college level. The shortsighted people who were given control of the budget and then failed to create replacement plans for vital resources like public computers. The dead-weight managers who didn’t like new ideas because new ideas mean having to do work.

I never expected to love working in libraries. Given some of the utter crap I’ve seen or heard about, I’m still surprised sometimes that I do love libraryland. Every time I switch jobs, I think about leaving libraries. Every time I end up staying. I stay for the fierce defenses of privacy, for the eclectics of the projects I get to sink my teeth into, for the unexpected interdisciplinary collaborations, for the students who finally understand that college academics aren’t just about passing a test. Most of all, though, I stay for the library workers. There are so many wonderful people working in libraryland; I can’t imagine leaving and working elsewhere.

My early managers never taught me that I didn’t have to take a browbeating from irate faculty members, so I make a point of telling it to the people I supervise and backing up those words with actual support in unpleasant situations. Do we need to kick someone out of the library? I’ll do that. Do we need to rewrite policies so I’m able to kick someone out of the library? I’ll do that, too. I’ve seen too many library power structures that ignore librarians who abuse their power, so I do my best to prevent such abuses when I can or correct the system to prevent future abuses if I’m too late for the present. Disciplinary
procedures exist for a reason, and library leadership has a responsibility to enforce the rules. (Or if the rules are bad, library leadership should work to correct that.) I hear tales of library managers who guilt trip people for taking time off (or worse), so I encourage people to use their leave and model best practices by using my own. If vacation, personal days, and sick days are part of your compensation package, you are entitled to them. We all need time away from the library! Basically, I am constantly learning from the things that are being done wrong all around me, and I try to create a better environment for myself and my colleagues.

In the end, I know I can’t fix the world. I can’t even fix libraries, if I’m being honest. And I worry because I know I have so many knowledge gaps—all the knowledge gaps that go with being part of the dominant culture of libraries. How many abuses of power do I miss because they align with my assumptions? I work to constantly listen and learn and grow and notice, but there’s always room for improvement, and it’s hard not to compare myself to my mental image of a perfect manager who already has that perspective.

I can’t bring myself to step down, though, or to stop applying for library leadership positions. I refuse to stand by and allow library leadership to harm my colleagues while I spend all my time working around my manager’s limitations; it’s better to do my best as library leadership myself. I have to at least try to be the kind of manager/administrator/leader I wish I saw more of because, from what I’ve seen, there just aren’t enough of the good ones out there.

So, here’s hoping I can continue to learn more ways to help employees thrive, even if they don’t look or sound like me. I’ll start with the basics: learn everyone’s pronouns and how to pronounce the name they go by, listen not just to what people say but what they mean (reference interview skills, anyone?), recognize folks publicly for their contributions and ideas (even—or especially—when they prove me wrong), start dialogs rather than making assumptions or accusations when things go wrong, and shut down patron or staff behavior that will make folks feel unsafe. I’ll listen to the science during global pandemics and do my best to create and support a workplace with policies, services, workflows, and spaces that keep staff members as safe as I can manage. I’ll do my best to plan far enough in advance that we have time to come up with new ideas and try things out, instead of reacting to a continuous string of crises (barring unexpected global catastrophes). I’ll support the time and labor involved in building genuine relationships outside the library that make library work and values visible on a wider scale so that we stop being so often ignored or taken for granted.

In a perfect world, all of that would be baseline requirements. Wanting to achieve that ought to be the bare minimum that everyone applying for library leadership jobs already has. My experience indicates that not to be the case yet, and I’m so, so tired of it.