

Toughest job in the library

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Abstract

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Purpose – The purpose of this article attempts to portray the unique and complex role of library middle managers. This important and influential position can be a proving ground for new and old managers as libraries continue to evolve, adjust policies, introduce new services and meet the needs of their users. Circulation managers as influential middle managers are realistically depicted as busy, overwhelmed and isolated, but welcome the opportunity to provide leadership and enhance their professional development.

Design/methodology/approach – This viewpoint is solely based on the author's varied experiences and personal reflections as a circulation department head providing leadership alongside colleagues in a busy academic library.

Findings – Department heads as managers of circulation departments are pivotal positions in every library. Circulation heads performing as middle managers are responsible for a full range of administrative, managerial and organizational services. Circulation heads are well positioned as change agents simultaneously directing frontline staff members, policies and services while providing valuable insight to library administration. Yet, circulation managers experiencing constantly evolving responsibilities, are too often found to be caught in the middle negotiating inconsistencies. Successful circulation managers require an eclectic mix of essential skills initiating and deploying change, defining success, dealing with people, actively participating in professional development and providing leadership.

Research limitations/implications – The study and research of library middle managers in public and academic libraries is practically nonexistent. As libraries increasingly create, adjust and reinvent library services, spaces and visions due to increasing digitization, in response to emerging online environments and new service models – middle managers and circulation librarians are excellent and proven pivots to negotiate and successfully implement this change.

Practical implications – As a crafted article written by a former head of a circulation department every staff member, student and librarian serving in access/borrowing/circulation departments should consult this article as required reading.

Social implications – The voices of library middle managers are too often muted, not valued and rarely celebrated. This viewpoint article written in a conversational voice depicts circulation librarians as middle managers that bring value to all libraries and should be heard.

Originality/value – This paper depicts the opportunities and challenges faced by, as well as the skills and competencies required by librarians serving as circulation departments heads.

Keywords Library management, Middle management, Circulation librarians, Organizational change, Managers, Strategic change, Organizational change

Paper type Viewpoint

There are several tough jobs in every library

Some of these tough jobs involve serving the public as frontline service workers. Other tough jobs involve dealing with difficult people, communicating bad news, and yet others involve managing, leading and negotiating change. Yet, one of the perennial toughest jobs in all libraries is that of middle manager.

This article is a homage to librarians that thrive as middle managers. The author thanks colleagues that have helped him through good and difficult times, and those that continue to demonstrate excellence within their communities. A special shout out to current and former circulation librarians including Brock University Libraries' Monica Rettig, University of Waterloo's Alex McCulloch, University of Windsor's Karen Pillon and others for their service, example and friendship. Thanks to John Szabo of the Los Angeles Public Library for his contribution, encouragement and insight. A big thanks to Dr Barry Keith Grant, Emeritus Professor of Film Studies, FRSC, for his assistance with this manuscript. Thanks to Steve O'Connor, editor of Library Management, supporting family, colleagues, and friends that kept me fed, upbeat, and loved during a challenging career.



Middle managers make up a significant part of every library organization. A middle manager is “. . . an employee of an organization or business who manages at least one subordinate level of managers, and reports to a higher level of managers within the organization. The duties of a middle manager typically include carrying out the strategic directives of upper-level managers at the operational level, supervising subordinate managers and employees to ensure smooth functioning of the enterprise” (Middle Manager, 2020). Middle managers in libraries are directly responsible for carrying out the strategic directives of upper-level managers at the operational level.

Most library middle managers whether heads of departments or managers of special units share comparable challenges such as directing staff members, reconciling budgets, deriving policies and contributing toward library-wide strategic initiatives. Yet, in my experience, librarians that serve as department heads of circulation departments (sometimes called access services or borrowing departments) maintain unique positions in libraries different from all other middle managers.

To outsiders, managers of circulation departments are no different from other library middle managers. Nothing could be more wrong. I have learned and experienced that circulation department managers are situational leaders, deal with unique services, oversee frontline staff members with varying competencies, are typically overburdened, stressed out and disproportionately deal with profound change that constantly comes from above and below.

Librarians that oversee and serve in circulation departments as middle managers encounter unique conditions in that they are truly service orientated, often on call 24/7, simultaneously pushed and pulled in many different directions, juggling a multitude of tasks and oversee the delivery of a wide variety of demanding frontline public services. If left unchecked, circulation librarians as middle managers can experience feelings of burnout, isolation and being overwhelmed.

This article offers a viewpoint based on almost 15 years’ experience as a middle manager, and over 30 years serving in different capacities in academic libraries. This viewpoint illuminates the essential position of circulation librarians as middle managers who celebrate their everyday success while continuing to perform their unique role in every library organization.

Why so tough?

Leading from the middle is never easy

Groeschel (2019) observed that middle management is a responsibility many people avoid because it is simply “not an easy job.” Craig goes on to note that “It can be hard to be in the middle, and middle managers sometimes get a bad rap. Middle managers often get blame from all directions—from those who report to them and from those above them . . . Middle managers are often given seemingly conflicting objectives with high expectations from senior management while still needing to get results from those under you who may not understand the full perspective. A middle manager usually has the full responsibility for achieving results, but not full authority to make decisions and influence direction.” Walking this fine line can be difficult as a middle manager with limited influence over a multitude of situational, operational and strategic issues.

A fellow library manager once observed that “tragically, most things break in the middle.” This is especially true for librarians as middle managers in most academic and public libraries when looking up or down the organization. Whether dealing with daily emergencies, proactively responding to change, or dealing with organizational renewal, middle managers are ultimately responsible for fixing things that break, reinventing old and overseeing new services, and implement the nuances of organizational change.

Middle managers as tightrope artists, bureaucrats, therapists or expert communicators are often described as the glue that holds organizations together. Quy Nguyen Huy (2001) in a classic *Harvard Business Review* article titled In Praise of Middle Managers observed that "...when it comes to implementing radical change, middle managers are your best bet for success" (p. 73). Huy further observed that middle managers are uniquely positioned to champion organizational change being able to see change opportunities not easily seen from above, deal with staff members at the appropriate level, and are best equipped to handle the emotion, chaos and stress that goes along with implementing change. Middle managers are strategically placed in the trenches with no choice other than to deliver, communicate, implement and mop up change as it happens in today's ever-changing libraries.

Middle managers are constantly communicating vision, mission and serve as the communications link between front lines and library administration. Interpreting policies, translating strategies and executing change are hallmarks of every middle manager's busy day. Public or academic library middle managers whether overseeing collections, systems, archives, instruction, reference or other library units fill this essential communications role. This is especially important when middle managers are directed to perform critical roles in both the formation and implementation of strategic change.

Middle managers experience inconsistencies. These inconsistencies include being immersed as a professional librarian in a mainly nonlibrarian and union-based paraprofessional world which may lead to feelings of personal and professional isolation. Inconsistencies are enhanced when middle managers work closely with subordinate staff members for hours on end, but not being "one of the gang." This dilemma creates artificial boundaries between staff members and middle managers that sometimes demarcates flow of information, friendships and conversations. The expectations of managing a series of never-ending tasks while knowing the intimate details of all reporting positions, policies, workflows and systems can also lead to feelings of inadequacy. Robert Farrell (2013) in a paper titled *Leading from the Middle* effectively noted that these and other inconsistencies middle managers experience make some days tougher than others.

Kearley and McCarthy (2011) in a paper titled *Caught in the Middle: Managing Competing Expectations* observed that, "Department heads are often caught between the expectations of upper administrators, fellow department heads, and members of their own departments" (p. 103). Being caught in difficult positions, dealing with ambiguity and managing your emotions long after everyone has gone home, is certainly well earned and an appreciated situation endemic to this job. Staying on top of administrative tasks, managing during difficult times, knowing about everyone's job but not mastering any, retaining a positive outlook, finding time for professional development are definite challenges, but not impossible tasks. Ryan Buller observed that "Access Services Librarians and Managers are leading a large group of individuals with different goals, personalities, and backgrounds, while reporting up through the hierarchy to administrators with focal points that may differ from the day-to-day operations of running a public service department." (p. 44). Clearly, circulation managers must effectively maintain a balance between what is right, what is difficult and what is expected.

In my personal opinion, managers as head of circulation departments find themselves disproportionately putting out larger fires, responding to more "unexpected" issues, being called out to deal with not so nice people, conjuring up effective listening skills and are surprisingly found at the wrong end difficult staff members and users' conversations. Adjusting to competing deadlines, validating a multitude of different service schedules, attempting to upgrade staff skills, managing expectations in a timely manner, improving customer service and connecting with full-time, part-time, casual and seasonal staff members are constant interruptions for librarians attempting to lead circulation services. Circulation librarians deal with the largest complement of staff members in most libraries and as a result are busier than most middle managers. Yet, every day, effective circulation managers make

time for staff members as part of an open-door policy, foster teamwork, encourage feedback, witness excellence, actively engage in working groups and a never-ending series of meetings, laugh with colleagues and try to remain sane while finding time to eat a healthy lunch.

Taking on the complex role middle manager can be a tough job. Middle managers demonstrate their value to the library when asked to push beyond the stereotypical personas dubbed as superfluous bureaucrats, needless overhead, failed want-to-be leaders in training, underachievers and librarians that have middle capacities and/or career outcomes. In spite of these negative connotations, most librarians as middle managers figure out competencies that are essential to enabling day-to-day tasks, proactively looking ahead, having a big picture perspective and anticipating change while continuing to be effective in their positions.

There are few library school courses or workshops that speak to middle management, develop tangential skills and even fewer that help transition new librarians into middle management roles. Simon Sinek (2020) observed that most organizations do not give enough managerial training, fail to teach managers how to lead, and as such too often promote people to leadership positions and expect that they know what to do without showing them how to do it. Finding yourself marginalized, not heard, underappreciated and in the middle can be a daunting task at the best of times. This position in the organization requires being professional, supportive, service-orientated, courteous, empathetic and having the right personality, temperament and lots of patience. Common refrains from middle managers overseeing circulation units experiencing tough times include feeling stuck, squeezed, drained and frustrated. Jumping into middle management may be an important career move, but it is certainly not for the faint hearted.

The right stuff!

What does it take to be an effective middle manager? What are the critical soft skills, hidden talents and competencies of a successful middle manager? Are middle managers made, or are they born? How do you know?

Paul Osterman, the author of the classic book titled *The Truth about Middle Managers: Who They Are, How They Work, and Why They Matter* (2010) observed that middle managers are knowingly bashed, take a lot of flak, painstakingly focus on simple, routine, day-to-day responsibilities, are perceived by many as victims, squeezed and are not fully appreciated, nor paid enough attention. Osterman ironically (or cynically) goes on to note that middle managers work hard, care about their work, and are instrumental in making their organizations function. Paul Williams in the book titled *Middle Managers as Agents of Collaboration* (2019) observed that middle managers are often “categorized by role, nature of work and activities. . . [and] represent a potentially influential group of actors who wield power and influence” (pp. 183–184). Middle managers in libraries can certainly learn from an extensive body of research from corporate work environments, public institutions and nonprofit organizations, but there is a limit to the appropriateness of relating this body of research to the work of libraries. Public and academic libraries, their clientele and social roles are unique, exceptional, fueled by different values, people, priorities, vision and expectations. Librarians as middle managers are a bread unto themselves.

Many librarians fall into or start their administrative careers as middle managers and often find themselves unprepared and overwhelmed. Mediating conflict, monitoring performance and communicating effectively are indispensable tasks that are too often learned on the job. Developing thick skin, wearing asbestos gloves, communicating unpopular or negative decisions is never easy and not for everyone. Knowing whether you have the right stuff to be a middle manager should involve a personality test to determine one’s ability to be self-aware, resilient, agile, task-driven, productive and effective when dealing with pressure from above, and from below.

Muir and Davidson (2018) observed that library middle managers require a very close working relationship with everyone, but more importantly the CEO or head of the library. It goes without saying that every middle manager must actively support library strategic plans and believe that library management has their back. It takes hidden talents to interpret and operationalize policies while doing the right thing even with a limited degree of independence. When relationships with library administrators become uncomfortable, heads of circulation departments begin to question their skills, self-reflective about their career aspirations and postulate on quitting or moving on to another library. Being a circulation manager may not be a first managerial position or career choice for everyone.

Hornaday (2013) observed that being stuck in the middle there “. . . is confusion about where your responsibilities begin and end” (p. 4). As a circulation manager, you quickly learn to balance the incessant tension between management expectations and the reality of delivering frontline service. The daily grind of serving, managing, sometimes being unpopular, making tough decisions, does not let up, even when you have to leave unfinished business at the end of a busy day.

Why so admirable?

Knies (2017) in an article titled *Leading from the Middle* observed that “Middle management is not a punishment nor is it a dead end. It can be a fulfilling, rewarding, and life-changing position that offers the opportunity to have a positive influence on an organization” (p. 174). Effective managers acknowledge the incessant rigor, pace, newness and challenge of this work. Many middle managers for the most part enjoy working in libraries while learning on the job, grow into the position, are very resilient, have a great sense of humor, and are experts knowing how best to navigate senior administrator’s strategic and tactical thinking. Middle managers are passionate about working within functional teams, solving problems, initiating change, developing staff members, effectively shifting into different roles, providing exceptional and much appreciated services. Middle managers in successful libraries are open to change, lead by example, earn their colleagues’ trust and respect, and strategically understand the technical and social fabric of their organizational units.

The thrill of working directly with users, being a successful change agent and serving for the greater institutional good is intoxicating for most circulation managers. Although circulation managers may be lone rangers, mediators, counselors, mothers, friends, disciplinarians and good listeners at times – most circulation managers would not want it any other way. Effective circulation managers learn to manage from the trenches while juggling a vast array of responsibilities. Happily, as middle managers, they know that what they do directly impacts services, staff members and in academic libraries – student success.

Gratton (2011) in a column titled *The End of the Middle Manager* echoes the sentiments of many onlookers that see the end of middle management. This lament has been heard in libraries for some time as middle managers are thought to be tragically caught up in library reorganization, technological change, evolving services and reduced spaces due to the increased importance of online or digital collections. Gratton observed that “. . . the classic job of middle manager will soon disappear” and goes on to observe that technology itself has become the great general manager. Is there a future for middle managers? Are libraries more than collections, spaces, places and services? I have observed many middle managers in libraries doing amazing and groundbreaking work while continually adjusting to such change. I see middle managers leading change knowing that the future of libraries is driven by powerful social forces toward something better. Successful middle managers are practitioners and advocates for transformational and social change. Middle managers especially in libraries are not future proofed. Yet, like circulation managers, they are well

positioned to lead change from the middle unleashing, realizing and giving life to the importance of libraries.

I have known many great circulation managers that fight for what is right, learn to let things go, are not afraid to stick to their guns and effectively manage from the middle. It is unfortunate that every library director, associate and senior library managers do not earn their librarian administrative stripes first as circulation middle managers.

The good news is that most library middle managers are content in their position, satisfied with tackling new expectations of upper-level management and welcome opportunities for change. [Do and Nuth \(2020\)](#) observed that confident middle managers are receptive to opportunities to gain new skills, thrive in supportive environments, are adaptable and capable learners, are able to meet the challenge of taking on new or different roles, and can lead change when given the chance. Michele [Leininger \(2014\)](#) in a dissertation titled *From Librarian to Proficient Manager* eloquently captured the challenge and passion of successful public library frontline middle managers when stating “. . . managers universally expressed pride, love of job, and service to others and affirmed the community’s role as a motivating factor” (p. 4). Librarians as middle managers are a special breed, to be admired, even when pushed by the challenges of declining budgets, changing user expectations, the impact of digitization and the forces of technological change.

Award winning, public library champion and senior administrator with more than 25 years of experience, and current City Librarian of the Los Angeles Public Library, John Szabo eloquently depicts the indispensable role that middle managers play in all libraries. “Middle managers are critical components of any successful library as they must play numerous challenging roles. They must be creative, adaptable, and innovative while ensuring the nuts-and-bolts operational responsibilities are executed with minimal disruption. Critically, middle managers must be team leaders, consensus builders, and go-to experts with deep organizational memory. Interpreting policy, serving as an institutional voice, and “wearing the mantle” of the library are also expectations. Worthy of great applause, middle managers are stars of the center stage.”

Responding to change

In an era of increased downsizing, digitization, redistribution of spaces, places, services and change – is there a future for library middle managers? How might heads of circulation or access service units change with changing expectations? How might circulation managers continue to contribute toward the whole of the library? The literature continues to document the pivotal roles middle managers play as change agents ([Buick et al., 2018](#); [Conway and Monks, 2011](#); [Currie, 2000](#); [Harding et al., 2014](#); [Sudirman et al., 2019](#)). Responding to change involves ever-changing institutional, professional and personal implications for professional practice, support from formal and informal networks, and continual training. Donald [Barclay \(2016\)](#) so richly captured this sentiment when speaking to the constantly evolving and essential role of libraries, “Any library, public or academic, able to live up to so important a role will never outlive its usefulness.”

I remember telling a colleague that worked in a different library department that circulation staff members have a tough job, but they would not change it for anything. Working directly with the public, dealing with a new and difference experiences every day, working as a team to support strategic opportunities, receiving thanks for a job well done, and being the face of the library is both satisfying and very rewarding. Managing expectations, accessing performance, being creative in finding ways to support staff members has always been challenging for circulation librarians. Recognizing, adapting and responding to change is nothing new for librarians as middle managers.

Looking forward, library middle managers contribute to the wholeness of every library as essential pivot points. As libraries reinvent themselves middle managers are essential resources directing, managing, cajoling and working alongside staff members to foster positive change for future success.

It is difficult to discern how circulation managers and their departments will respond to change. There are no empirical data, playbooks, crystal balls, forecasts or prognostications on the future of libraries as it relates to the complex role(s) of middle managers and those currently serving in circulation departments. Although, there is help for library middle managers to be effective when developing essential skills (Aho and Bennett, 2011), establishing positive roles (Chang and Bright, 2012; Patillo, 2018), initiating training (Rooney, 2010), facing challenges (Miller, 2020), building necessary skills and traits (Buller, 2018), competencies (Sudirman *et al.*, 2019), negotiating influence (Laning and Nixon, 2013), building strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), fostering team building (Tinline and Cooper, 2016) and learning to stay on top (Madden *et al.*, 2018). LaGuardia (2012) put it best when she observed that effective middle managers “Revel in the successes of their team/department/library, both the collective and individuals.”

Responding to change will involve middle managers remaining flexible, adaptable and taking on new roles and emerging services. Essential skills and talents that may help circulation departments and their managers help pivot and successfully make this transition may include:

- (1) Circulation staff members are customer service experts. This comes with the territory. Staff members are constantly learning, sharing, experiencing and responding to change. Retaining and redirecting these service skills will be even more appropriate when engaging with stakeholders, new user groups and responding to any number of emergent social issues with the shifting of collections, spaces and services from print/in-person to digital/online and virtual environments.
- (2) Access staff members are well positioned as frontline conduits gauging user expectations, experiences and gaining valuable qualitative feedback that cannot be easily found elsewhere. Taping into this perspective will be essential when creating new services, spaces and opportunities for engaging with increasingly diverse, inclusive and evolving communities.
- (3) Frontline staff members are expert searchers, masters of many domains and awesome multitaskers. These skills help enable circulation staff members to effectively navigate through an increasing myriad of organizational, networked and digital information platforms. Circulation staff members constantly meet tight deadlines, work well as teams and are confident and effective independent workers. Circulation units are well transferable to online, data-centric and information environments. Indeed, circulation service staff members are tried-and-true, proven, adaptive and willing to take on new challenges.

It is hard to image where libraries will land in the future. Change will happen – it always has. Responding to change will most certainly involve planning, consulting, sharing vision, coaching, score keeping and implementing new ways of providing services, spaces, collections and programs. Successful circulation librarians as middle managers have always responded well to this challenge as leaders navigating staff members through this change.

Chang and Bright (2012) effectively observed challenges all middle managers face “Today, the future is driven by the development of computer technology and of how the users adapt to new technology advances. To plan for the future, library top administrators must constantly envision and predict the future; they are the decision makers and lead the library’s

direction. On the other hand, middle managers are dealing with the current needs. To be effective in their role in the changing world, middle managers need to ask: how can we balance the current needs and the future developments? How do we fulfill the current needs without losing sight of the future? And, how can we manage the constant change without losing sight of the direction? Needless to say, middle managers are being challenged by these questions, and will continue to be challenged. Thus, to validate our new role, middle managers in the new era need to develop a new set of abilities to respond to the changing environment” (p. 219). Middle managers are well positioned to respond to change at all levels.

Concluding remarks

Farrell (2014) observed that, “Middle managers occupy a very powerful position within [every] organization” (p. 698). Middle managers grapple with a full range of library, service, managerial and technical issues. They develop the ability to see horizontally through the organization, learn to manage for unexpected change, read minds, collaborate unique working relationships, love their staff members, touch most of, if not all services and systems. Successful middle librarians effectively communicate both up and down the organization, provide keen insights into strategic library services, processes and plans. Effective managers optimistically see their positions as an excellent training ground for advancement and succession in spite of all the drama.

Because libraries are service organizations, middle managers deal with a wide and varied range of people, expectations, services and change. Library middle managers are not perfect. They struggle with managing outcomes and therefore experience tension, pressure and conflict in trying to juggle competing demands. The good news is that managing a circulation, or a borrowing services department is a team sport. Successful middle managers know their limits, champion their staff members, lead the charge every day, adapt to change, grow and appreciate their unique position in the library organization – even when it gets tough.

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