

Grand Valley State University

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Reframing our viewpoint: The 6th ACRL/ Harvard Leadership Institute

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Reframing our viewpoint

The 6th ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute

If you ask any previous participant of the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute (HLI) to describe the experience in a single word, most would probably describe the experience as “transformative.” This certainly was the case for us when we, and 96 other academic librarians from across our country, Canada, Puerto Rico, Germany, and Egypt, met August 8–13, 2004, on Harvard’s campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Preparation to attend the institute took place over the spring and summer. Participants were mailed several readings including *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership* by Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal.¹ While this served as the primary textbook for the week, much of our learning was through the case study method including real-life cases prepared by each participant.

This week of intensive study consisted of meaty large-group lectures, intensive small-group discussions, and lots of nightly reading assignments. It was a week devoted to learning about leadership in higher education and about our own leadership strengths and weaknesses. During the final wrap-up session, Joe Zolner, director of Harvard Institutes for Higher Education, asked us to reflect on three questions:

1. What are you leaving?
2. What are you returning to?
3. What have you gained?

It is the answers to these questions that best sum up and provide a glimpse into the learning, camaraderie, and transformative effect the institute had on those of us who attended.

Discovering a learning community

When we left the leadership institute, what did we leave? We left:

1. A true teaching and learning community.
2. An environment of guided thinking, led by “master teachers.”
3. A safe zone.

An effective learning community consists of a classroom, motivated and prepared students, and highly effective teachers. Each of these ingredients was fully evident.

The more formal learning occurred in a highly interactive lecture format with touch-of-a-button technology in a beautifully appointed classroom. True to the Harvard pedagogy, much of the learning in this large-group setting involved the case study method.

Many of us were in awe at the truly exceptional teaching put before us. All of the instructors are master teachers, and it was a pleasure to watch them at their craft.

Shortly after our arrival, Joe Zolner set the stage by laying the ground rules that would ensure a safe learning environment. Joe challenged us to “show up ready to think and prepared to share.” He began our approach to case studies by guiding us through the process of examining context: identifying people, situations, and time frames. He

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stressed the importance of taking inventory of all the factors to prepare for the assessment of a case.

Going up on the balcony

Joan Gallos, director of higher education graduate programs at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, led us in a discussion of the text *Reframing Organizations*. In her witty, creative, and high-energy style, she led us in “Reframing Leadership.” Initially we considered three themes: how you lead, what you lead, and where you lead from (purposes and values). Gallos often illustrated her points with selections of music, emphasizing “swing” as a life skill, and delighted us by occasionally breaking into song herself.

We learned that reframing is choosing to view the same thing from more than one perspective. The four-frame leadership method emphasizes viewing a problem through structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames. According to Gallos, “leadership effectiveness is the right leadership option for the correct situational diagnosis and the skills to implement it well.” Gallos suggested that using the four frames allows us to “go up to the balcony,” to get a full perspective. The technique develops a sense of “what do I see?” and “what am I missing?” Many participants agreed that having the ability to “go up to the balcony” would be a valuable tool when dealing with ambiguous situations at our home libraries.

Gaining institutional understanding

When asked what they gained by attending the institute, several participants said that they had gained:

1. A toolkit to make our institutions better.
2. A renewed appreciation of higher education and the value of their institution.
3. A deeper view of their institution.

In her session titled “Leadership and Strategy: Implications for Library Leaders,” organizational development consultant Maureen Sullivan helped us move our understanding

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of the four frames and strategic leadership to the academic library environment by analyzing the only cases of the week that were set in libraries.

Sullivan led a discussion of the six leadership styles that get results, as outlined by Daniel Goleman in his book *Primal Leadership*.² She emphasized that leadership behavior can be situational and that we can choose an appropriate leadership behavior just as we choose a frame to view a particular situation.

One library-related case that Maureen discussed was a difficult one written by a participant about a situation in her home library. It provided insights and guidelines for action as well as a collective acknowledgement about the difficult situations we each will face in libraries at some point in our careers. Maureen ended her session by helping us contemplate how we define excellence for libraries by listing the key elements of a world-class library. How should we be spending our time? What is going to make a difference to students and faculty?

Unique to the HLI is the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of our institutions from the perspective of chief academic officers, presidents, and deans. Jim Honan, educational cochair of the Institute for Educational Management at the Harvard Graduate School of Education was highly skilled at getting us to critically analyze case studies illustrating leadership when confronted with constrained financial resources and changing contexts in higher education. Honan’s lively, interactive instruction emphasized planning and strategy development, aligning resources with institutional vision and mission as well as the importance of institutional performance measures.

Instructors Honan and Zolner wrote several of the cases that illustrated effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation in higher education. The last of these was the case of "Curriculum Change at Babson College." Imagine our delight and surprise when a major player in this case study spoke to us over a speakerphone from Italy! He was on call to answer our questions about what had transpired in the case and how it had turned out. This interaction was a high point of the week.

Personal transformation

The things that participants said they gained by attending the HLI were often highly personal and heartfelt:

- I have gained insight into myself and others.
- I have gained an understanding of my "big assumption."
- I have been reborn; the old me is gone.

Lisa Lahey, associate director of the Change Leadership Group for the Harvard Graduate School of Education, led one of the most transformative sessions of the week.

Lahey, coauthor of *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*³, helped us to see that the real reason people won't change has to do with deep-seated underlying assumptions. In an exercise she called "overturning your immune system," Lahey directed us to examine our behaviors and assumptions. It was a powerful experience and another opportunity to take on different perspectives as she challenged us to test our assumptions about our own behavior.

Not everything was serious

Our week was an immersion in a rich learning experience, but there was plenty of fun to be had. One participant, Kitti Canepi, was inspired to write a song entitled "Reframe It." Kitti and the Change Agents, an illustrious group made up of eight institute participants, performed the song at a bountiful New England clambake. We were feted

at an opening reception in Radcliffe Yard; toured Harvard Square; and had access to libraries and museums, the Harvard Faculty Club, and a chance to walk along the Charles River.

Summary

Participants shared many positive comments at the end of the week. The experience reinforced that change is possible. We left "a week on the balcony." One student was leaving "with strength and faith"; another with "faith in our profession and the people in it." Another expressed a "better understanding of the difference between leadership and management." As one person said, "The *fear* thing is gone."

When we left Harvard, we left a group of dedicated people who are passionate about making things better for their institutions. We gained a renewed faith in our profession and the people in it, and we returned to opportunities to use what we have learned, to do our jobs more effectively.

The challenge for us as HLI participants is to sustain our personal growth and our ability to reframe our challenges. We continue to interact online and are developing a reading list for future discussion.

To rekindle an appreciation for the value of what we do, we would strongly urge you as a leader at your library to sign up for the next ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute so that you too can leave with Joe Zolner's blessing for a "future full of meaningful change."

Notes

1. Lee B. Bolman and Terrance F. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
2. Daniel Goleman, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).
3. Robert Kegan and Lisa L. Lahey, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). 