Coding with Those Who Show Up
Two Methodologies on Technical Committee Work

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers our library's attempt at applying a "laissez-faire leadership" model to technical committee work. Since its introduction in the 1990s, scholarship on laissez-faire leadership has historically viewed the concept very negatively. However, we argue here that many of these perspectives are straw man arguments that do not adequately consider the possibilities of a laissez-faire model. Following some dissenting voices in the literature, we would like to reclaim the laissez-faire model as a way to facilitate library technical work under certain very specific circumstances. This paper will describe the organizational context where these laissez-faire methods worked for us. Our conclusion is that this approach can promote autonomy, responsibility, and productivity. We feel that this reevaluation of this concept can provide an important framework for self-organization when doing technical work.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Kingsborough Community College Library undertook a major rebuild of the library's website (https://library.kbcc.cuny.edu). This paper focuses on the workflows and theoretical commitments that made this work possible. Over the past two years, our website committee experimented with techniques to make our work more efficient and effective, and we came up with interesting solutions that have helped our department. We settled upon a laissez-faire model of leadership, largely to the satisfaction of everyone involved. This paper will explore how these workflows were devised and implemented, as well as some of the results that were achieved.

I will begin this paper by describing and engaging with the theoretical literature on laissez-faire leadership. I will then describe the committees and workflows that allowed us to effectively build the most recent Kingsborough Community College Library webpage using a laissez-faire model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Laissez-faire leadership," as described in the literature, is a useful theoretical frame to help researchers and professionals understand the work of library website committees. Laissez-faire leadership is a concept that is frequently laden with negative connotations in the scholarly literature. These negative views have been a part of the literature on transformational leadership styles since its inception, starting with the pioneering work of Bass, and Bass and Avolio.[1]

Since these foundational texts, the study of leadership styles has grown and now spans subdisciplines in both management and psychology. Despite being multidisciplinary in this way, the literature is cohesive in its methods and conclusions. It is mostly quantitative, mostly strongly negative about laissez-faire management, and perhaps underserved by humanistic methods.

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Therefore, as a novel approach, the literature of laissez-faire leadership is addressed here in a spirit of humanistic analysis. The discursive postures of the authors who discuss laissez-faire is a primary focus. While their work is often quantitative, this paper is concerned with what the authors *say* and *claim* about laissez-faire, rather than with their quantitative approaches. As a result, this approach forgoes a quantitative meta-analysis in favor of a humanistic one. As described below, this generates novel conclusions.

Most of the existing literature in this field consistently and unambiguously views laissez-faire leadership negatively. The paradigm set by Bass lives on mostly unchanged in subsequent works. Rather typically, laissez-faire is defined succinctly (and derisively) by Ågotnes et al. as "a nonresponsive and avoidant type of leadership."[2] Glambek, Skogstad, and Einarsen describe "destructive interpersonal processes at work . . . [that] flourish in the presence of weak, indistinct and passive-avoidant leadership."[3] Salin and Hoel make the point that "laissez-faire [is] a destructive form of leadership, associated with poorer employee attitudes, decreased wellbeing, and more interpersonal problems and mistreatment."[4]

The negative view is amply represented in the literature, and while examples are enumerated below, this list is by no means exhaustive. There is an abundance of documented complaints with a laissez-faire approach. While this vein of criticism runs deep, only a very high-level overview is given here:

- Laissez-faire is a "detrimental workplace stressor in its own right"[5] and is "characterized by the omission of constructive leader behavior [and] has been related to a variety of negative outcomes, such as reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and health problems"[6]
- It facilitates workplace bullying,[7] and as a result, "organizations should continuously strive to create and uphold a climate and culture where laissez-faire leadership is not tolerated."[8]
- It encourages time theft and burnout: "Time theft will be more likely to occur among employees who work under the supervision of a laissez-faire leader."[9] Usman et al. concur with a similar point.[10]
- It is generally a "workplace stressor."[11]
- Laissez-faire is an "ineffective way to lead" and "a form of destructive leadership."[12] For example, "laissez-faire has been argued to be a destructive form of leadership, associated with poorer employee attitudes, decreased wellbeing, and more interpersonal problems and mistreatment."[13] Kelloway et al. and Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen make similar claims.[14]

Despite this widely held consensus, a different reading of this concept is provided here. This paper will argue for a reimagining of laissez-faire leadership as something that is not inherently harmful or disruptive, but that can be deployed constructively in certain circumstances to facilitate the work of independent teams.

It is suggested here that laissez-faire leadership is portrayed negatively in the literature because it was initially used to contrast with more highly valued styles of leadership, such as "transactional leadership" and "transformational leadership." These are both described by Bass.[15] Starting with Bass's original scholarship and carrying on through subsequent work, transactional and transformational styles are seen as desirable types of leadership, whereas laissez-faire is mostly used as a (less well-elaborated) counterpoint to define them against.

In this respect, "laissez-faire leadership" is very often a straw man. But this one-sided view, represented in the list above, is not constructive. Kelloway et al. helpfully point out that transformational and laissez-faire approaches "do not reflect separate categories of leadership," which suggests that Bass's trichotomy is inadequate.[16] Indeed, reality is more complex than Bass's original taxonomy. It is maintained below that using laissez-faire as a foil is an overly simplistic position. Even Skogstad et al., who take a strong view on the negative aspects of laissez-faire leadership, acknowledge that it is "different . . . in more ways than simply representing an antipole [to other forms of leadership]."[17] As Robert and Vandenberghe say, there is a valid case "against the literature."[18]

Thankfully, some authors have offered different readings that challenge the dominant idea that laissez-faire leadership is necessarily a detrimental approach.[19] Ahmed Iqbal et al. suggest that "such [negative] views prevail because laissez-faire has not been researched in depth."[20] Hinkin and Schriesheim; Hu, Harold, and Kim; Lundmark, Richter, and Tafvelin; Robert and Vandenberghe; and Judge and Piccolo all agree that work on laissez-faire leadership is sparser than for other leadership areas, and is in need of further study.[21]

Some of the most potent critiques of the dominant narrative about laissez-faire arise from a cross-cultural perspective. Yang and Li argue that what is considered exemplary leadership in the West may not be shared by other cultures.[22] They point out that laissez-faire leadership may in fact be more constructive in other cultural contexts. Yang and Li's contextualization of cultural concepts is highly welcome, especially when contrasted with some studies' (such as Chen, Zhu, and Liu[23]), which fail to grasp the very culturally situated nature of their concepts of leadership.

The failure of the concept of "laissez-faire management" to apply cross-culturally is important because it clearly demonstrates that it is naive to assume that this management style is ubiquitously harmful. In other words, because it *can* be constructive in some places, it means it is not *inherently* a bad management approach. This critique opens an important door for a reassessment of laissez-faire. This paper therefore suggests that characterizing laissez-faire management as "bad" leadership demonstrates, at best, a significant elision in cross-cultural understanding, and at worst, a demonstrated willingness to impose certain management concepts where they might not be appropriate.

Elsewhere, Yang goes on to argue that there are positive characteristics of laissez-faire leadership that are not directly attributable to cultural differences.[24] Along the same lines as Robert and Vandenberghe, she argues that leadership is much more contextual than some of the above authors suggest.[25] In her paper, Yang contextualizes laissez-faire leadership styles by affirming that she "suspects that situational factors [are] important in determining the positive or negative directions of laissez-faire leadership."[26] These situational factors, according to Yang, include subordinates' competence and capability, supervisory trust, and adequate time to develop trust among team members.[27]

Writing about academic libraries specifically, Okpokwaili and Kalu recommend laissez-faire approaches under specific circumstances: "This [laissez-faire] technique is suitable when employees understand their responsibilities well and possess strong analytical skills. This approach can be used when leaders are very much confident in team members."[28] This emphasis on confidence in team members is critical, as leadership needs to be able to rely on the team to deliver results.

Furthermore, following Ahmed Iqbal et al., this paper maintains that a "laissez-faire style of leadership empowers followers by involving them in decision making and instills in them the feeling of being integral components of the business process, which motivates them to direct their energies toward achieving organizational objectives."[29] This empowerment phenomenon was directly observed in committee work.

By highlighting an underappreciated nuance in the literature of laissez-faire management, this paper takes an important step in reviving the concept from its moribund status as a straw man and moving forward toward a more well-rounded view of what laissez-faire leadership is and does. As Yang says, "It is not laissez-faire leadership per se, but the extant definition and the subsequent measurement of it, which leads to a one-dimensional negative view and outcome of laissez-faire leadership."[30]

Lastly, the popular literature on management features some important and interesting perspectives on laissez-faire as well. For example, for Murnighan, leading a team should require very low engagement; the leader's lack of involvement can coalesce and motivate a team, fostering trust. For Murnighan, "doing nothing" as a manager gives team members the latitude to make better decisions.[31] This argument will be revisited below.

THE CONTEXT AT OUR INSTITUTION

To situate the above insights in our local context, it is necessary to describe our library and the work we were trying to accomplish. In our efforts to build a new library webpage, we found that we were able to apply a laissez-faire leadership model largely to the satisfaction of all involved. We discovered that laissez-faire was a suitable model for committee work in our department.

What was clear from the outset was that the library webpage at Kingsborough Community College needed a redesign. There were several reasons for this:

- The website looked dated. Despite attempts to improve it over the years, it still looked like a site from a previous era.
- The site was not responsive at all, so it worked terribly on mobile.
- It also relied heavily on outdated technology like jQuery and jQuery-UI, which today are regarded as mostly obsolete.
- There were concerns about accessibility. While we did not receive any accessibility complaints about the old website, we were concerned about liability because of legal accessibility mandates.
- Lastly, we had received complaints about usability. Site navigation was not clear, leading to confusion among users.

As a result, we wanted to replace the old site with something more modern. Almost everyone in our department agreed that the old site was well past its useful lifespan. The reasons to move on were compelling, and no one was advocating for keeping the old site.

Secondly, there were also campus political reasons to move away from the existing setup. We wanted to migrate from an information technology (IT)-administered approach to one where the website was run by the librarians. On the IT-administered page, we could not fix problems immediately, as they had to pass through a gatekeeper in IT. This was a source of a lot of frustration for the librarians. Also, sometimes the IT department's edits were not as accurate and detail-oriented as we would have liked them to be. The result was that there was often a back-and-

forth negotiation with IT to set things right. It was time consuming and frustrating to all involved. Our strategy to solve these problems was to move to a librarian-administered page using LibGuides CMS as a platform.

Thirdly, we wanted to deploy some of the interesting features that are specific to LibGuides CMS. LibGuides CMS has widgets, such as easy-to-build forms, a chat-with-a-librarian functionality, and a room-booking tool, among other features.[32] In a LibGuides-based setup, this prebuilt functionality can be easily dropped into a webpage. Building such features from scratch would have been complicated and time-consuming, but they are relatively straightforward to configure within LibGuides. We were eager to deploy these features to help our users.

LibGuides was also a desirable solution because our university had recently begun paying for a subscription for CMS for all the colleges. We had been working with a basic LibGuides subscription previously (without CMS), so the addition of CMS offered the possibility of greatly improved workflows at no cost to our library.

To be clear, this was very much a programming project, not just an exercise in building with the WYSIWYG LibGuides editor. We elected to use only certain features of LibGuides' built-in toolkit. For the overall structure of the page, we largely ignored LibGuides' box-based model and built everything from the ground up ourselves using the Bootstrap framework (https://getbootstrap.com). Building with Bootstrap in LibGuides is a widely accepted best practice, as Bootstrap is very deeply integrated into the LibGuides ecosystem. Bootstrap is behind LibGuides' responsive layouts, and it also offers quite a lot of prebuilt CSS and JavaScript components to help build out the visual design of the page. Using these tools, we produced a webpage that does not look like a typical LibGuides-based page. We built upon the functionality available from Bootstrap by writing custom JavaScript to improve the drop-down navigation menus. We also built a more complex JavaScript-based interface—using Vue.js (https://vuejs.org)—that allows users to interact with our discovery service.

The LibGuides/Bootstrap-based site went live in September 2021 after eight months of work. We found that it was generally well received. Although we did not formally study our community's response to the new page, anecdotally everyone we spoke to had positive things to say about the new site. The feedback we received consistently conveyed the message that the new site was much better than the old page.

Several months later, in 2022, under new library leadership, our department began placing more emphasis on continuous feedback and continuous improvement. As a result, we sought feedback on our webpage from our campus's Communications Department. We approached them because they had recently gone through a large-scale website migration of their own. They very kindly went to great lengths to give us actionable and detail-oriented suggestions. While the Communications Department did not call for any drastic changes, their recommendations for improvement were granular, incremental, and constructive. They encouraged us to focus further on user experience and accessibility.

With this advice in hand, we revisited our code in the summer of 2022 and refined the site further. The second major release in August 2022 was less work-intensive than the initial build, but it was still a major undertaking and occupied our committee for much of that summer.

RATIONALE FOR OUR APPROACH

The new website moved the locus of our web work from our campus IT Department to the library. This meant that most of the technical work now fell fully under the librarians' control. As we began to shoulder the work of building and maintaining the site, the remit of the library's Website Committee was suddenly greatly expanded. The workload on committee members—and expectations on the committee—shifted dramatically. This necessitated some new ideas on how the committee would do its work.

Previously, the Website Committee met relatively infrequently, ranged widely through different topics, and did not go into very much technical detail. When the campus IT Department administered the entirety of the library website, the librarians were largely discouraged from exercising their design and website administration skills. The lack of attention on technical issues in the Website Committee at the time was likely because the committee had been disempowered from making changes to our webpage.

With the handover of the page to the library, the new responsibilities provided more autonomy but put an additional burden on some members of the Website Committee. The librarians who were comfortable working with design and code now had much more responsibility for the website infrastructure. But it was not feasible (or prudent) to put the entire weight of the redesign solely on a couple of librarians' shoulders. We needed a workflow that would spread the workload and allow for efficient building and iterative revisions.

The problem with tackling this project in the Website Committee was that this committee was simply too large to make effective technical decisions: it included the majority of the librarians (approximately eight people) from a wide range of functional areas. The Website Committee also had too long a history of discussing things too abstractly, from a perspective that was too high level, without addressing technical questions in depth. While that approach has value in some respects—it is good for "blue sky" thinking—it did not go far enough in solving the nuts-and-bolts issues of building a website. This hindered its ability to make important, concrete choices. The Website Committee's expertise, somewhat ironically, was not necessarily focused on the practical aspects of building of websites. We needed a committee that was detail-oriented and reasonably sized that could effectively tackle technical problems.

OUR APPROACH

We attempted two pragmatic solutions to address these organizational issues. One of these was deployed during the initial website build in Spring 2021, while the second was deployed during the revisions of Summer 2022. These were related yet differing strategies, both of which aimed to address the organizational problems discussed above. Initially, these were seen as mostly ad hoc arrangements, although with the passing time we began to see the consistent, underlying logic that supported both. The first approach was our best initial attempt at self-organizing web work. The second is a refinement of the first, though both strategies had their own successes and failures.

Strategy 1: "The Alphas"
The first of these solutions came about in early 2021, when the Website Committee agreed to form a Technical Subcommittee to work on the code for the new site. Calling something a "Technical Subcommittee" was admittedly not very good branding, even for librarians, and most of our colleagues' initial reaction was to steer well clear of such a committee. Thankfully, for reasons

unknown to me, one of the librarians cleverly rebranded it as "the Alphas Committee," which improved perceptions by a lot, because it broadened the perceived remit of the subcommittee. While we needed technical skills, we also paradoxically needed to downplay the need for technical skills to encourage participation. Our focus was instead placed on design thinking and the aesthetic aspects of website construction. While our goal was to enlist librarians to do technical work, emphasizing the nontechnical aspects as well helped motivate some of the librarians who were less certain of their technical abilities to join in the effort to build a better site.

In the end, the Alphas Committee consisted of four librarians, with a variety of ranks and roles, contributing varying perspectives to the project. Together, these librarians did most of the heavy lifting of building the initial LibGuides-based site in 2021. This was a very productive arrangement. Despite (or perhaps in part because) of a lack of guidance from further up the library hierarchy, the Alphas proved efficient at writing and critiquing their own code and designs. They iterated on their own internal feedback, largely to the satisfaction of those who participated. There was a creativity to the committee structure that, in our experience, encouraged experimentation, participation, and egalitarianism.

Rushton and Mulligan summed up their experience with a similar team nicely: "It was an advantage to have a small, dedicated, and agile team that collaborated and communicated well. This positive chemistry or esprit de corps among members allowed us to debate any controversial issues professionally, not personally. We internalized the team's mission and worked single-mindedly toward its successful completion."[33]

The work of the subcommittee was coordinated in the Alphas' regular meetings, and then the code was written in sprints, mostly by the web librarian. When the site was released in September 2021, after several months of work, it was very well received by the campus community. The codebase was greatly modernized. The adoption of Vue.js contributed greatly to the readability and concision of the code. We met our goal of having the site completed in time for the start of the fall 2021 semester. These positive outcomes very much validated the Alphas' workflows and methodology.

Strategy 2: "Those Who Show Up"
By the summer of 2022, the Website Committee was ready to undertake the first substantial revisions of the website since its 2021 release using the feedback from the Communications Department; however, some discontent with the existing organizational structure had surfaced in the meantime. There was concern that the Alphas were taking on too much of the work without enough input from the broader Website Committee. There were requests to include more librarians in the decision-making process. This posed a problem for those librarians who found the Alphas to be a very efficient and effective subcommittee. The question we now asked ourselves was: how do we open up the meetings to more people while maintaining the intensity of focus and capacity to produce code that the original Alphas Committee demonstrated?

The solution devised by the librarians was to meet very, very often, and to also open the meetings to the entire Website Committee. The subcommittee set up a standing meeting every Tuesday to work on the code. It was not glamorous work, and the subcommittee did not hold back on getting into the technical weeds together. Sometimes we would live-code as a group. In this way, despite the new arrangements, the committee carried on with its very technical focus.

Importantly, attendance at these weekly meetings was entirely optional. The meeting happened every week, no matter how many people showed up. Once or twice, I coded by myself, but typical

attendance ranged from between two to four librarians. One of the effects of having regular open meetings was that those who were interested were more likely to attend. This had a net positive effect on the tone of the meetings. Everyone who was in attendance was there because, for the most part, they wanted to be a part of the tasks at hand. We were very happy to discover that the level of engagement of the participants rivaled that of the Alphas meetings. This approach also responded to the Website Committee's concerns: there was more breadth of participation among the librarians—all members of the Website Committee attended at least one subcommittee meeting during the summer of 2022.

SUMMING UP OUR EXPERIENCES

The two committee strategies just described both thrived on a minimal level of leadership. Both groups were largely left to self-organize, with very little input or guidance from higher up the library hierarchy. This played to the team members' strengths. Our library's relatively flat organizational chart also encouraged relative equality within these teams. Somewhat unusually, at our library all librarians share the same job title (reader services librarian), despite our different functional areas and academic ranks. So, while some librarians may supervise para-professional staff, there is no hierarchy among the librarians (aside from the chief librarian). This starting point of equality certainly contributed to the culture that made these teams effective.

Additionally, the teams were permitted to mostly ignore library politics and departmental turf and to focus more on "rough consensus and running code."[34] The chief librarian, who had led the previous redesign, as well as being the most obvious "leader" figure in this context, took a mostly aloof interest in the project and left the subcommittee alone to do their work. Higher up the hierarchy, the chief information officer elected to stay largely uninvolved, despite being ultimately responsible for the original, superseded site. As a result, in the subcommittees, the librarians could do their work there autonomously. We were left on our own, mostly to thrive.

The autonomy afforded to these subcommittees was essential to the committee cultures that we built. The self-directed structure of the subcommittees allowed for collaborative relationships that encouraged productivity. To use the terminology of the management literature, the "laissez-faire leadership" afforded to the librarians by the library administration made the workflow possible.

DISCUSSION

In our department, the website redesign teams were given the opportunity to measure our progress not against any managerial yardstick, but against our own opinions on the quality of the code we produced. We were accountable to each other to deliver a quality product. I believe that the members of the teams described above felt this keenly and wanted to produce the best possible site. This sense of accountability was a strong motivator for both "the Alphas" and for "Those Who Show Up."

The laissez-faire approach that our library leadership took toward the redesign teams arises out of a long history of leadership decisions in our department that largely predate the current management. Unfortunately, I'm unable to provide a complete account, as this history stretches back to well before my time at the library. Perhaps what was different this time was the strong sense of autonomy among the participants in the subcommittees and the willingness of management to let the librarians run with that autonomy, perhaps if only to see what would happen.

As a result of this localized departmental history and culture, our committees recognized and were familiar with a hands-off approach and knew how to build constructively in this context. As Ahmed Iqbal et al. said, "this [laissez-faire] style proves very effective when employees are highly skilled and motivated."[35] I believe that our library management trusted the librarians enough to try a variation on Murnighan's "do nothing" approach, and their trust was rewarded with a self-managing team doing good quality work.[36]

That said, this model may not work in all libraries. A team of academic librarians working to build a website may not be typical of teams found in most organizations. Yet in academic libraries, where faculty librarians are used to their autonomy, such an approach may be useful and fruitful. The workflows we devised were successful. We produced a library webpage that, for the most part, the librarians have expressed pride in and that they compare favorably to the webpages of similar peer institutions. Creating a productive team culture provided led to the technical accomplishments that followed.

The success of our approach has influenced other functions in the library. For example, the acquisitions librarian is adopting a similar strategy for the subcommittee that she is organizing to create our new collection development plan. While the context and the nature of the work is different, the workflow seems to be effective for her committee as well. So, while we have had some success at replicating a successful laissez-faire strategy, we continue to experiment with these approaches. We of course understand that we are advocating for vague and subjective concepts like autonomy or self-directedness; while the positive results may be self-evident when they appear, there is no guarantee that these values will take hold in any given committee or community. We have found these approaches to be successful, and while we can do our best to foster autonomy, the outcome is always uncertain.

There are notable practical limitations to this workflow as well. Specifically, "the Alphas" approach unfortunately centralizes the technical work in the hands of a small committee. We covered some of the problems with such an approach above. We have aimed to counter this weakness by better documenting our code. We hope that this will support future workflows and make the process more robust.

CONCLUSION

Our organizational work in the committees described above was not transformative, but it was effective. The committees were able to produce technical output in a sustained and constructive way. Our approach was not an exercise in trying to produce an exemplary committee structure, but rather a pragmatic way to write code as a group. We found that embracing a laissez-faire methodology allowed the team to do good work, to the satisfaction of most everyone involved. We encourage others to experiment with such methodologies, if only because it can be a satisfying way to work. We look forward to seeing future case studies and research on this topic.

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