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How Two Women Embraced Their Path to IT Management
By Rachel Vacek and Kat Hagedorn, University of Michigan Library

Rachel's Background

In 1999, I earned my undergraduate degree in English and wasn't sure what to do next. After graduation, I worked for a year in a bookstore and eventually decided to pursue my MLIS. Seventeen years and four positions later, I'm now working at the University of Michigan Library as the Head of Design & Discovery. I've taught courses and workshops on technology and information literacy, provided reference and desktop support, and developed many websites and applications. As I moved to new positions at different institutions, I purposefully focused on expanding my knowledge of web services, digital libraries, and user experience. When the opportunity to move into a management position opened up, I didn't feel ready for it, but I pursued it as part of my career growth. Over time I built relationships, earned trust and respect, and gained confidence. I also sought out leadership and management training opportunities, and I'm now more comfortable being a manager. I find it very rewarding to mentor and help others unlock their potential.

There were many people who saw something in me and wanted to help me on my journey. I was always thinking about the future, the big picture, and what I needed to do to help make that vision a reality. I also sought out individuals whom I thought were successful and could offer advice on how best to make an impact. Over time, I learned that although it's important to have supportive colleagues who believe in you, it's just as if not more important to believe in yourself.

Kat's Background

I received a biology degree from Cornell and gravitated to libraries almost immediately upon graduation. After getting my MLIS from the University of Michigan, I enjoyed a number of positions building taxonomies and metadata, which eventually led me back to U-M to be a project manager for the OAIster project and eventually the U-M digital library. With these positions, I had the opportunity to be part of overarching, strategic conversations inside of our Library IT division, and this whet my whistle for leading change as opposed to solely managing it. Along with Rachel, I pursued this opportunity as part of my career growth, despite not feeling quite ready to be Head of Digital Content & Collections. Since moving into management, I've begun learning more about my team and how to shape our efforts towards creating the best digital library experience.

Along with many women in IT, those who believed in and helped me understand my own path were almost primarily men. I considered them far ahead of their time in

recognizing the value of someone green, a little scared of new opportunities, and very much unsure of her place in IT. At the time, I assumed that being part of IT meant that I had to be a coder. That concept has since changed dramatically to include those who develop, design, and manage, among many other roles, but in the mid 1990s this was less clear. Those who encouraged me saw I was eager to promote, preserve, and manage spaces in libraries, and particularly in IT. They helped shape my vision and taught me to rely on my instincts and experience. This has been extremely useful in my transition to management.

Unconscious Bias

Whether we like to admit it or not, bias is something that happens regularly in the workplace. It's an issue that sometimes requires us to "do battle" with male employees. While we can all get formal training on unconscious bias, our concerns center around the difficulty of changing the status quo. We can start recognizing where bias factors into our work and relationships with others, but we need something more pertinent to start changing our own habits. It's helpful to look at ourselves and identify patterns of unconscious bias that may be influencing our decision-making processes. It's also good to practice having a conscious awareness of our biases, and engage in conversations with colleagues about their successes and challenges in doing the same.

Women in IT often have an unconscious bias because of the imbalance of men in IT, and men in management positions in particular. In libraries, there are usually more women than men; however, in IT departments, men are almost always the majority. Whether following men throughout our career is a pipeline problem or a different kind of systemic problem, the end result is that we sometimes feel deficient. Like begets like, and as we continue down our paths of following men, we are showcasing it as the primary pathway for other women in the field, as well as unconsciously bolstering the concept of following in the footsteps of men. In many ways, we consider this work to be part of a "revolution**.**" It is pushing an agenda that requires folks in the field – men and women! – to be taught, trained and have their thinking modified around the concept of unconscious bias.

What's our advice?
- Take unconscious bias training, and apply it in everything you do.
- Encourage everyone in IT to take that training, especially the men.
- Take all opportunities to showcase that training so others can begin to learn.
- Push your own team to be part of the revolution.

Women Mentors and Colleagues

An interesting counterpoint to our real-world examples of following the lead of men is the involvement of women in our professional lives. In both our situations, besides having very few female bosses, we have also had few mentors who were female. One could consider this solely a pipeline problem except that we've each had a number of women colleagues in every position we've been in. And in many cases, these women were strong, focused, passionate advocates for IT and the services and products we offered. Unfortunately, they weren't usually in management positions.

Mentorship is mostly about leadership. It's the recognition of value in another person and the intention to help shape that person's viewpoint of the landscape and current worldview of a given profession. When people move into a new position, they hope for more than just going through the standard onboarding procedures to gain a deeper understanding. We hope that our women colleagues who have been in the profession longer than we have will take time to welcome and show us the ropes, because they, too, understand and have experienced the challenges of being a woman in IT.

We recognize that there are a large number of hurdles to overcome being a woman in IT. Our female colleagues are working overtime to show their value to the organization itself. This leaves little time for outreach to new, less experienced colleagues coming into the organization. This can be threatening to some extent - if it's hard enough to show your own value, you might be reluctant to encourage another woman to show her value, too. However, the result of mentoring is a leaning, more and more, towards women having equal footing with men in this field. It may look like slight movement, but each time we mentor someone, it shifts the balance.

What's our advice?
- Be proactive about taking another female colleague's hand and helping her find her path.
- Seek out your own mentor no matter what stage you are in your career.
- Encourage men, too! It's vital we all learn how to mentor women.
- It's important that women learn how to mentor both women and men to cultivate newer models of leadership.

Leadership and Management

Often becoming a manager is not an intentional path. Positions open up, and someone who believed in us, or has recognized our leadership capabilities, encourages us to apply for that next step up. We often don't feel ready to move into management because we haven't received the training needed prior to obtaining those positions. It's up to us to find opportunities and request that training.

The title of manager doesn't necessarily mean a person is also a leader. We both have worked for exceptional managers who were also inspiring leaders, as well as managers who were less than successful at leading or coaching. We believe that it's important to not look at training as a single learning opportunity, but more as a pursuit in lifelong learning. In some environments, women may need to lead differently than they would normally in order to overcome unintentional barriers. Managers need to continue learning management skills and how to be an effective leader in all stages of their career.

As we are both department heads and manage people, we also want to emphasize that anyone moving into positions of leadership should get training on the difference between managing people and managing projects. We embrace the *Getting Things Done*[1] philosophy which emphasizes moving your actionable work to a trusted system external from your mind so you can focus your attention on tasks and not have to worry about recalling everything. We recognize it's important to produce quality work, but management is also about leadership, and transitioning to this philosophy can be challenging if you have only been managing projects and not people.

What's our advice?
- Be persistent in learning about the differences between management and leadership, and apply what you learn.
- Learn about management and leadership topics outside your comfort zone.
- Think about how the *Getting Things Done* philosophy applies to the management of people.

Concluding Thoughts

Being a woman in IT can certainly have its challenges, as is evidenced by our thoughts about bias, mentorship, and leadership. Women can be successful in management positions and leadership roles, but they may need to work a little harder to achieve that success. If you want to move into management, think about your support network, the people you admire, and the people you recognize as allies. Do they understand how to navigate the biases and roadblocks you might encounter as a woman in IT? Are they willing to mentor? What kinds of training opportunities are available, and if there are none, how can you create them? Do you recognize female colleagues who can assist you, or others that might need your help? If you have the passion to make Library IT more inclusive and welcoming to women, we encourage you to think about our advice as you embrace your path to management.

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[1] Allen, David, Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 3-4.