

Leading from below: making time and space for critical and collective reflection

Leadership can take on many guises and be found in the most unlikely places. You don't always need to look to management for examples of good leadership, it can come from anywhere.

As mid-career professionals in different library roles, we want to be leaders even if we don't hold formal leadership positions. Leading from below, is all the best bits of leadership, without the stress and responsibilities of management. It's about nurturing our own leadership skills, empowering our colleagues, providing services that impact our communities and managing upwards to bring new ideas to realisation.

There are many ways to lead from below. Here, we will explore one way, which connects colleagues across teams, informs us of the latest research and generates ideas for personal growth and new ways of doing things.

At La Trobe University, two like-minded colleagues established the Journal Club, a monthly lunchtime program for collective and critical reflection. It is a grassroots initiative developed by library workers for library workers, informed by joint experiences in community activism and the principles of creating communities of practice. In this informal, inclusive, and safe space, everyone can participate and be heard.

An essential aspect of good leadership is critical reflection on the relationship between theory and practice. Journal Club invites participants to bring their experiences and ideas with a view to collectively broadening our understanding of contemporary issues and challenges in our practice.

The sessions cultivate practical skills for group facilitation, such as presenting, listening and navigating conversations between colleagues who are located across campuses. Gently encouraging and guiding new voices, Journal Club challenges participants' assumptions and fosters creativity. For staff not in formal leadership roles, there is an opportunity to develop and practise these soft skills.

Journal Club provides an antidote to siloed ways of working, as it lets anyone share what resonates with them. What they choose to talk about does not need to relate to their role. The opportunity to spark ideas and influence new thinking across teams is empowering and helps people feel meaningfully involved in shaping the workplace.

Last year, the library went through a significant period of change during a year-long realignment of positions. Having a supportive space where we could gather together was a useful way of managing our stress and anxieties during an uncertain time. The program's efforts to focus on the big picture and develop practical leadership skills was reassuring and the outlet we all needed. It had real life impacts as well, with some of the topics covered taking people's careers down paths they didn't expect.

But no program like this can be successful without endorsement of senior leadership. Their enthusiastic support of this initiative recognises the value of cross team engagement to develop new ideas and practices, and to challenge the status quo. It shows high levels of trust in allowing staff to take an active role in shaping the future direction of the library. In such situations, leading from below and leading from above complement each other, and together can be a powerful instrument for positive change and empowerment.

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