

Give a librarian a fish

*Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day.
Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.
Confucius*

Introduction

Geraldine and I titled our paper “Give a librarian a fish” because we feel that the well known quote from Confucius, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” is a very good analogy of what coaching sets out to achieve. A coach doesn’t do the work for you. Rather, they help you build your skills and confidence to achieve your goals. I will discuss where I see coaching fits in the life of a library professional and Geraldine will give you more background on the types of activities and techniques she uses as a coach.

I think that it is important that we are enthusiastic about our lives and our work and if you feel that vital spark is missing you might consider career coaching as an option. I was fortunate enough to win a career coaching package with Geraldine at the first New Librarian’s Symposium and even though it is a highly personalised relationship there are some things I’d like to share with a wider audience.

You may be wondering where career coaching fits in between university training, workplace training, conferences, seminars, professional reading and continuing professional development activities.... I think there are three main reasons why a personalised coaching experience can be very useful to a librarian’s career. I’ve structured my thoughts under three key aspects; extinction, eating elephants and expansion!

Extinction

One of my favourite quotes is “Nothing endures but change.” This is attributed to Heraclitus a Greek philosopher who lived from 540BC – 480BC. Imagine his surprise if he could see the pace at which the world around us changes in this century! There are many changes that each of us will face in our careers and our lives – and hopefully only ever a ‘threat of extinction’. There is a good chance that you will encounter any of these threats at least once in your life:

- **Burnout** – It’s a very real problem for many people, losing interest and motivation in your job can have quite serious effects.
- **Restructuring** – Can you learn to adapt successfully to a new role / new hierarchy / changed working conditions? Can you learn to thrive on change?
- **Redundancy** – Could it happen to you? Are you continuing to develop your skill set in the marketplace? Would you consider a lateral career move? It has always been my ambition to stay a step ahead of the chopping block!
- **Work / life balance** – What impact would taking time out to have children, moving interstate or suffering serious illness have for you? What changes could you make to escape from the job that ate your life?

I don’t believe it is possible to ‘bullet proof’ our lives or careers. In my first job the library team was restructured at least three times in five years so I have always assumed that was the way things worked in libraries! I do think it is possible to work on your professional and personal skills to minimise the risk of “extinction” and to get greater satisfaction generally. Some of the survival skills you might like to work on include:

- **People skills**
- **Strategic thinking**
- **The ability to prioritise**

- **Attitude**
- **Problem solving**

Eating elephants

As I look around I wonder how many future state and national librarians are sitting in this room? Are some future ALIA and IFLA presidents, university deans and directors of major law libraries are sitting at your table? Perhaps your personal goals are even more challenging – striving to achieve that delicate balance of work and family life? Janine Schmidt, University Librarian at The University of Queensland would encourage all of us to have Big Hairy Audacious Goals.

Whatever your big dreams are it can be really difficult to figure out “how to get there from here?” Your dreams might be so bold that you wouldn’t dare to speak them out loud in case someone laughed. There is of course a difference between dreams and goals – goals are dreams with deadlines.

I’m not sure how many of you have experience eating elephants – but the basic principle I understand is to cut them up into very small chunks. Chunking things down may not present a real challenge for you if the elephant in question is a familiar task (eg. preparing the annual library budget or running a one day seminar) but it can be more difficult to break something down into pieces when it’s an unfamiliar elephant. Sometimes we have the opportunity to work on a huge new elephant with a fabulous team of people – I think you’d all agree that the NLS2 committee have tackled this elephant with enthusiasm and professionalism and we should all be congratulating them on this fabulous program.

Often we face big elephants in our careers / lives and we can feel that we’re alone. A career coach doesn’t eat the elephant for you but can help you to break it down into smaller chunks to tackle.

One of the goals that I worked on with Geraldine was improving my fitness. Diet and exercise – sounds like fun doesn’t it??? Instead we came up with a much more exciting goal = climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge! We then worked on the ‘steps’ necessary to get me there. It was much easier to be motivated to work towards such a fun goal, and as you can see from the photograph I did it!

Expansion

“Librarians ... once they have proved themselves worthy by performing some valiant act of librarianship, are accepted into a secret order and are taught the raw arts of survival beyond the Shelves We Know.” Terry Pratchett “Guards! Guards!”

Please raise your hand if you feel you already have all the skills, knowledge and experience you will need for the jobs you will have over the next 15 years. Where do you want to be in five years time? We keep talking about the greying of the profession have you considered what career opportunities this ‘changing of the guard’ may present? I know that many people are still working towards their dream job, first job, first professional job, first job where they will actually listen to your good ideas...

It is likely that we will all need to expand in a number of ways to solve the challenges we will face as a profession and as individuals over the coming decade. We will need to:

- Expand our **skills** in budgeting, conflict resolution, negotiation, presentation skills, cultural awareness.
- Expand our **thinking** to be strategic, big picture, lateral, professional – possibly even redefining what that means.

- Expand our **options** to keep a current skill-set, prepare for lateral career moves and cope with a changing environment.
- Continue to expand our **definition of 'libraries'** as the Internet, RFID, alternatives to paper publishing, sustainability, cost shifting, cooperation and new industries shape our future.

You can be sure that when Ian Thorpe decided to expand his repertoire of events for the Olympics he talked it over with his coach and when I decided I wanted to groom myself for a career move up to library manager I worked on it in great detail with my coach.

The future

"40% of the workforce will be eligible for retirement in the next 3-5 years." This quote comes from *an article written by* Frederick A. Miller and Judith H. Katz, "The Boomer Bust – Big Problems Ahead for Organizations" (www.kjcg.com), *and published in Link&Learn (May 2004)*. It's a US figure but there are similar patterns here in Australia. Some people are describing this as a 'brain drain'.

Have you considered the opportunities and the challenges this will present us with? One of the most important factors will be gleaning the knowledge and experience of our colleagues before they retire. Mentoring programs are a great opportunity to do exactly that and I would encourage you all to tap into the knowledge bank and network with our more experienced colleagues as much as you can in the coming years.

Summary

We included the relaxation exercise in our presentation because we wanted to give you a gift you can take away and use anytime. We also wanted you to be focused, calm and receptive to our paper, so we used a simple relaxation technique to do just that. Coaching is experiential and involves taking action and using the body and feelings...this exercise helps take you out of your head (thinking) and into your body so you can be more aware of your feelings and more focussed in the present. Coaching helps you to do that too, so we wanted to give you a little taste of the increased sense of self awareness that a coaching program can bring.

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