Why is it important that school library media specialists (SLMSs) become leaders in the education process? In many instances, both within the building and district, administrators do not know what an excellent library media program looks like—or what our role in the teaching process should be. They certainly do not get the information in most administrative certification programs, and many must rely on previous life experiences (sadly, not all positive). Many know there are SLMSs in their schools, but don’t really understand the potential of having an educational leader in their library media centers.

What are the characteristics of a good leader? We all know it when we see it, but how can it be defined?

Take a few minutes to ask yourself the following questions from “Leadership and Learning Communities”:

1. How does your school or organization encourage learning for members?
2. Of your behaviors and actions, which would you wish for others to emulate?
3. For whom have you been a role model?
4. Whom have you mentored?
5. Who has been a mentor for you?
6. To what degree is your school or organization a community of teachers, learners, and leaders?
7. What is the fundamental vision for your school or organization?
8. How great is the creative tension between vision and current reality?
9. What do you see as the vision in the following statement? “Our goal is to acknowledge the rich past and to develop a responsible and self-sufficient citizenry who possess the self-esteem, initiative, skills, and knowledge to learn throughout life. We value diversity, celebrate change, and affirm tradition.”

How do these questions relate to AASL’s mission and goals “to advocate excellence, facilitate change, and develop leaders in the school library media field”? The goals are to: provide leadership in the total education program, participate as active partners in the teaching and learning process, connect learners with ideas and information, and prepare students for lifelong learning, informed decision making, a love of reading, and the use of information technologies.

Today, school district administrators and teachers are being held accountable for test scores and an increase in student achievement. If you want to be considered a leader in your school, you need to be an advocate for yourself and your program. You must be proactive: “Here’s how I can help your students...” You must be aware not only of curriculum and study units, but also of the tests themselves. What kinds of questions are being asked? What terminology is being used? Are those consistent with classroom and library instruction? How can you develop your collection to increase the students’ interest in reading and promote the love of reading? How can you lead your students to be ethical users of information? How can you lead your district in a time of rapid change?

Consider the following information from the National School Boards Association:

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Every two or three years, the knowledge base doubles. Every day, seven thousand scientific and technical articles are published. Satellites orbiting the globe send enough data to fill nineteen million volumes in the Library of Congress—every two weeks. High school graduates have been exposed to more information than their grandparents were in a lifetime. Only 15 percent of jobs will require college education, but nearly all jobs will require the knowledge equivalent of a college education. There will be as much change in the next three decades as there was in the last three centuries.3

Who better to lead students in locating, evaluating, and synthesizing this information than a SLMS? Our goal is to acknowledge the rich past and to develop a responsible and self-sufficient citizenry who possess the self-esteem, initiative, skills, and knowledge to continue to learn throughout life. We value diversity, celebrate change, and affirm tradition.4

Reflecting back over a thirty-year career in education, I have encountered a variety of leadership styles, everything from dictator to passive aggressor. In thinking about those who had the strongest influence on me and motivated me, the following descriptors come to mind: vision, passion, humor, encouragement, and support. I had the opportunity to work for an organization that promoted risk-taking and whose mantra was "continuous improvement." What a wonderful environment in which to become a leader! A significant amount of that organization's resources were put into Covey training. In Covey's 4 Roles of Leadership, the following traits are identified: pathfinding—creating a vision (passionate about getting and giving); aligning—creating a system to achieve vision and strategy; empowering—releasing talent and energy; and modeling—living and leading by example.5 Not everyone is born a leader—few are—but with determination, mentoring, and targeted professional development, there are few who cannot learn to use their personal styles to become leaders. And leaders are indispensable in their schools.6

If you are interested in the issue of leadership for school library media programs, look for these programs and others at the AASL Conference:

Aha! A Library Coordinator! What Do You Do?—Carroll Makemson, Sharon Early and Linda Corey
Beyond Book Selection to Student Achievement—Nancy Wilcox, Angela Rosheim, Joan Arth, Susan Miller, Roxann Brenton, Sandi Cole, Lottie Green
Changing the Future by Changing the Profession—Nancy Graf, Martha Shinners, Betty Marcoux
Designing a Facility: Making It a Place Where Every Student Succeeds—Gail Formanack
Help Every Child Succeed at Your Library by Marrying Theory, Practice, and Assessment—Joette Stell-Mabry and Carol Doll
Managing the Library Media Center for Student Success—Barbara Fiehn
No Library Media Center Left Behind: Assessing Library Media Programs—Gwen G. Jackson and Rejeanor Scott
Professional Learning Communities and the Library Media Center—Ken W. Stewart, Linda Corey, Marsha Fassold, Barbi Simons

References
5. Stephen Covey, 4 Roles of Leadership (Provo, Utah: Franklin Covey, 1999).