

Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership

Alma C. Ortega. *Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Chandos Publishing, 2017. 98 pp. \$54.51. Paperback. ISBN: 9780081006375.

Alma C. Ortega (University of San Diego) highlights the underreported phenomenon of poor leadership in academic libraries that can infect an entire organization and demoralize library staff. Drawing upon a survey completed by 492 academic librarians and a semi-structured follow-up interview conducted with 54 of them, Ortega writes to help librarians identify problematic leadership and to help organizations heal after that leadership has been removed. She uses throughout the book the term “toxic leadership,” borrowed from the field of leadership studies, as a technical term for leadership situations characterized by “actions that cause considerable and long-lasting damage to individuals and the organization that often continue even after the perpetrator has left the organization” (6). The motivation for her work is this “considerable and long-lasting damage,” and so the book functions less as a guide for how to avoid and remove problematic leadership and more as a guide to identify such leadership and to work to heal organizations and librarians after these leaders are removed.

The book is organized into three sections. The first two chapters focus on definition. Drawing on the field of leadership studies and the scant literature on toxic leadership in academic libraries, Ortega highlights the danger for organizations and libraries that do not take seriously the threat of poor leadership and the danger for individual librarians who fail to communicate their negative experience with library leaders. Primary among these dangers is lowered morale and decreased productivity, which, in turn, negatively affect a library’s service for its users.

The second section of the book (chapters three through five) addresses ways of handling toxic leadership. Ortega’s advice is less focused on reporting and working toward removing bad leaders, though she does emphasize the importance of librarians’ documenting problematic behavior. Rather, she highlights the importance of librarians’ finding channels of communication, not only to make administration aware of the problem, but also to avoid the danger of librarians’ internalizing their frustrations. Her survey results document psychological and physical ill effects resulting from enduring toxic leadership. Ortega assumes that simply removing the toxic leader will not solve the library’s problem, and so in chapters four and five she explores strategies for healing after the problematic leader has been removed. She looks first at how an organization can heal, including the way the organization should give references for a toxic leader and better interview practices in seeking new leadership. Then she suggests personal strategies librarians should take to minimize the residual impact a removed toxic leader may have on a librarian’s career.

In the final chapter of the book, she turns from the hypothetical to the real, summarizing four different “case studies”: examples of toxic leadership built upon her interviews with fifty-four academic librarians. After each case, she offers a couple of general discussion questions, designed to help the reader translate the specifics of the case to his or her own situation.

Ortega’s highlighting the prevalence and characteristics of toxic leadership will be helpful to librarians and those in positions of library leadership. As she establishes in the first chapter, there is not a sufficient discussion of problematic leadership in the library literature, and so this work has value as the beginning of a conversation. Ortega offers a robust bibliography of leadership studies and academic librarianship literature that will benefit those reading their way into this field of study. She also writes clearly, balancing well her report of existing leadership literature with anecdotes and quotations from her interviews. She speaks with the voice of a practicing librarian, cognizant of practical situations such as family and geography that may demand librarians stay where they are, even under difficult leadership situations, while she is also aware of the bureaucratic inertia of institutions that often allows toxic situations to remain in place.

The book will be of most immediate help to those who work in large libraries, as Ortega does. The discussion throughout assumes a context of a large academic library (62.6 percent of her survey respondents work in university libraries), often

referring to layers of bureaucracy that will be involved in reporting and removing toxic leadership, as well as assuming the presence of many colleagues and a support infrastructure that may be unknown in small libraries at small institutions. For those who work in more isolated situations, further translation of her advice will be necessary. Perhaps of greatest value to both the librarian and the library administrator will be the four case studies, the mimetic function of which may help to identify toxicity in local situations.

Ortega's work highlights a topic that is not easy to talk about; few want to admit that they work or have worked under toxic leadership. And yet, Ortega's survey results, though by no means representative of academic librarians as a whole, do highlight the fact that toxicity is more common than the library leadership literature would suggest. Ortega's challenge in offering suggestions for handling this phenomenon is daunting because there can be no single set of steps that can remedy toxic situations. Each incident is embedded in its own context, as her four case studies clearly demonstrate. Therefore, Ortega's advice is ultimately generic, but it is so by necessity. She is to be applauded for starting this conversation, and librarians will benefit from reading the experiences of others as a lens to identify toxicity in their own current or past libraries and to become emboldened to do more than endure it silently.

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