



SHARED LEADERSHIP AT WORK

Julie Gittus was introduced to the concept of shared leadership via an email from the State Library of Victoria, an invitation to library staff across the state to consider applying for the 2010 – 2011 Shared Leadership Program.

Although a relative new employee within the library sector, my experience in community health had given me a keen understanding of the vital role good leadership plays in the effective operation of any organisation. But shared leadership? What did that model entail?

A quick search on the internet revealed that shared leadership involved collaboration of those involved, rather than the focus being on an individual leader. It was about the group agreeing on a shared vision, as well as the careful allocation of tasks according to strengths to ensure the vision became a reality.

The Shared Leadership Program is a Statewide Public Library Development Project, which is funded annually by the Library Board of Victoria. The program promised the opportunity for a 'deep learning experience' over five months to extend leadership and teamwork skills, and required a commitment to attend four residential workshops – ten days in total - as well as dedicated time to work on team learning projects that would be of interest to libraries across the state.

2010 was the year I'd decided to put my hand up for opportunities that pushed me beyond my comfort zone. Also, I sensed that if put into practice, the shared leadership

model had the potential to make a positive contribution to libraries across the state. And so, with the support of my manager, as well as my CEO Carolyn Macvean, I applied for the program.

Let's fast forward. I'm fortunate to be one of twenty successful applicants and we are together in a big airy room overlooking the mountains on the outskirts of Melbourne. Our task is to negotiate which learning action projects we will be working on over the next five months. My cheeks are flushed. My pulse is up. Eventually I make a series of decisions that lead me to being a part of the Volunteer Action Learning Project with four unknown colleagues from libraries across the state.

We greet each other nervously. Our group task is to develop a kit that will help libraries engage young people as volunteers. I soon feel relieved that my new colleagues are as passionate about the project's possibilities as I am and that our group is to be mentored by the project's sponsor, Jenny Mustey, Library Services Manager of Campaspe Regional Library.

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Our group's commitment to our project, now renamed The ProTeen Tool Kit, has given us the opportunity to experience the challenges and benefits of the shared leadership concept. The project has also enabled us to put into practice all we are learning within the Shared Leadership Program – self-awareness, team dynamics, communication, even stress management.

Who among us, when working in a group, hasn't had flash across our internal screen, "this would be so much easier if I could just do it myself"? But the fact is, five committed people have the capacity to achieve far more on a project than one of us alone. Through the trusting environment fostered by John Martin and Sue Upton, the Shared Leadership facilitators, group challenges have become a means to discover things about myself as well as others.

I've found the insights about the way I approach projects, and how that differs from those I work with, to be especially helpful. I now believe that the shared responsibility the five of us have developed for both our group and the project's success is a key component of effective shared leadership.

Over the last four months I have realised that any form of leadership, shared or otherwise, requires a heightened capacity for self-reflection as well as the ability to listen deeply to others. Only then can we work effectively with those around us to translate a shared vision into reality. It has been such a privilege to be a part of this learning process. I am looking forward to ensuring my shared leadership skills develop further within the context of public libraries.

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The ProTeen Action Learning Team.
Left to right: Narelle Stute, Tara Hossack,
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