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716 – Communication for Leadership
Library Director Interview
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Mary Beth Straples, Library Director at Midlothian Public Library was very accommodating in scheduling time to be interviewed. Her initial response was that she will always help library students from Dominican University because that is where she got her degree from. She jokingly laughed that the topic of leadership was a serious conversation and that she would have to give it some thought over the next couple of days prior to our appointment. I initially thought she was going to be thinker personality based upon her response. I told her that I would email her some questions that might be helpful for her to gauge the direction of the conversation.

Meeting Mary Beth was a pleasure and very insightful in how she directs the library. Our conversation started out more formal, with me asking her a couple of questions. We progressed to a more informal relaxed conversation. My first question was if she felt a leader needed to have a vision. She views that the difference between a manager and a leader is vision. A leader needs to be goal oriented and someone who can see the big picture. Followers need to believe in the leader's end goal, and trust in the leader. She stressed trust and not lying, as she stated those two qualities numerous times during the course of the conversation. A leader needs to also value the worth of the people who are following. A leader shouldn't ask the followers to do anything that the leader would not do. Mary Beth doesn't believe in a top down approach. She prefers a collaborative environment, and is open to her employees bringing up new ideas, as long as she doesn't have to implement them. If an employee wants something changed

and has a plan, that employee becomes the leader on the project, not Mary Beth. She likes to empower her employees to streamline any inefficiency that they come across. Although she knows that not every idea brought to her is a good idea, she always says that she will look into it because the employee feels heard.

I asked Mary Beth how the staff meetings were outlined. She said that they are once a month and everyone has to be there. The only excuse for missing a meeting is death. The old library director implemented that system prior to her and it worked so she decided not to change it. She opens each meeting with any new news and the board meeting report. After that the department heads report on their department. Then they go around the table and each person has the ability to voice their comments, concerns, or improvements. This is a great example of a leader giving followers a voice.

I asked Mary Beth what she thought her communication style was, and she responded with socializer. Even though I initially thought she was going to be a thinker type, I agreed with her assessment of herself. During the course of our hour long conversation, we veered off track numerous times to talk about comic books, dressing up at Comic-Con, Neil Gaimen, how we got into librarianship, and their recent Medieval Times programming they held this summer. The library spent three months putting together a day long Medieval Times event. They had magicians, storytellers, castle crafts, and other theme related activities. The entire staff dressed up in medieval dress and decorated the entire library. The event was so successful and fun that the staff volunteered to stay the entire day past their designated time without being asked. Midlothian Public Library's picture and article about their event was published in the paper after the fact. They were all delighted to see themselves dressed up having fun in

the newspaper. During the course of the day, the library serviced roughly 1000 people. On an average day they service around 200. People came and went all day long.

If we hadn't talked about their event, I would have never known that the next all day will be food related next year. I was very excited to hear this since I love to cook and bake, and I even have a food blog. I believe society needs to do a better job with educating children about food and nutrition so I volunteered to help with the event. Mary Beth said she would definitely contact me about volunteering, and even be a part of the planning process. To think that if Mary Beth would have ignored my email asking for a meeting, I would never have volunteered to help the library. I think that Mary Beth is a great example of a leader.