Title: Leadership Trajectory: Did the Aurora Leadership Institute make a difference?

Abstract

The Aurora Leadership Institute started in 1995 its mandate ‘to position leaders as dynamic and effective voices in our sophisticated information environment.’ Since then many librarians and others who work in the information industry have completed the program. As a 2006 graduate who made life changing decisions post-Aurora, I have often reflected on whether going to Aurora changed or boosted my leadership trajectory and whether other Aurorans had experiences similar to mine.

Last year, using a short survey, I asked Aurora graduates about their experiences post-Aurora and whether the program had equipped them to meet their own leadership aspirations and the expectations of their employers. I really wanted to know whether they perceived themselves as more effective leaders now and if the program had helped them along the way.

This paper will present the findings of a small-scale study. Many of the stories told are quite personal. As expected a significant number of those who participated in the study have gone on to become senior managers. Some left the profession and others made momentous decisions about their professional and private lives. The study does however answer the question - did Aurora make a difference. Many of the participants are on their way to becoming leaders in the profession and others have arrived.

Introduction

Now a six-day annual residential program held in the beautiful snowy mountains of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia, the Aurora Leadership Institute is for individuals with leadership potential - the emerging leaders of the information profession. Each year a limited number of participants from Australia and New Zealand are selected to attend. This year, 2011 will be the sixteenth Aurora Leadership Institute.

The Institute has a high standing in the information sector (Turner 2010). Many Aurora alumni have gone on to bigger and brighter things since attending such as becoming University Librarians, educators and senior managers. During the last fifteen years the program has been evaluated a few times to determine its’ impact. Like evaluations of similar programs, these studies focus on the satisfaction of participants, most notably Kay Barney’s 2003 evaluation and Debbie Dawson’s 2009 pilot study.

Barney’s research examines the short term impact of Aurora on participants and their perceptions of the value of Aurora to their work and careers (Barney 2004) whereas Dawson’s pilot has led a further study being undertaken in 2010 by the Institute. Although not publically available Nick Turner’s (2010) report Directions in Leadership Training summarises Dawson’s research.

This paper is another evaluation of the Aurora Leadership Institute. It reports on the findings of a 2010 small-scale study of past Aurora participants. It is a qualitative study that asks respondents to reflect on their experience at Aurora and whether their attendance made a difference to their career progression. The study captures the thoughts and perceptions of people that attended from 1997-2010.
Leadership and the Information Professions

Leadership development and succession planning are key issues for the information profession as we head into the next decade. The sector needs to be deft at providing opportunities for leadership development at the local and regional level to avoid a leadership crisis (Riggs 2001).

Salt and Huntley (2010) a demographer and social researcher respectively, state in their report *Future Directions*

What will unfold over the coming decade is the ‘baby bust’. This is the onset of a 15 year period in which baby boomers progressively exit the workforce and in so doing take with them skills…

Being prepared for the exodus of boomers is fundamental to the future direction of the profession (DeLong 2009). Hallam’s (2008a) extensive study of the Australian library and information sector (LIS) supports this view:

The LIS sector cannot ignore the reality and the impact of its own dynamic environment: the faster the pace of change, the greater imperative for staff development. The development of effective managers and perceptive leaders as part of the career development process is imperative if the progressive pace of retirement from the profession, with its associated loss of skills and experience is to be matched by incremental staff development strategies within it. At the same time, those continuing to work in the sector cannot be allowed to stagnate, but should have the opportunity for ongoing professional growth and stimulation.

In essence, an ongoing commitment to developing leaders is crucial for sector and will help us to better meet the challenges that are ahead (Roberts & Black 2007). Fortunately there are many leadership programs offered by reputable organisations and a number designed specifically for information professionals.

Leadership development in the Information Professions

... preparation for senior leadership roles is in most cases random, episodic, circumstantial and in-complete... librarians often find that they have drifted in to leadership roles and responsibilities without adequate preparation, and must rely on instinct and adaptability to grow in these roles (Webster & Young 2009).

Instinct and adaptability may get you a long way however, if the information sector is to flourish we need to nurture and support aspiring staff. There are a number of approaches to developing emerging leaders. These include:

- Formal study
- Training programs
- Leadership institutes and residential programs
- Tailored in-house leadership programs
- Mentoring (Roberts & Black 2007 ; Wilson & Corrall 2008)

Many of the programs on offer such as Aurora use an experiential learning model where learning is self-directed, involves reflection, practical activities, mentoring, networking and peer support.
Both Raab (2009) and Riggs (2001) note that opportunities for formal leadership training are not always readily available. Residential programs such as Aurora are costly and the number of places available each year is limited. Raab (2009) advocates looking for leadership opportunities wherever you can and Riggs (2001) acknowledges that 'leadership development is too important to limit to only a few librarians.'

Universities such as Queensland University of Technology (QUT) are often well catered for by human resource departments that can offer a range of programs for managers to enhance their managerial and leadership skills. McCarthy (2005) mentions that staff at QUT can access:

- Human resource training programs
- Nominate for external programs such as Aurora and other courses
- Undertake secondments and project work

Whatever pathway open to emerging leaders, the sector has a responsibly to develop leadership potential. As Turner states below:

> Strong and capable leadership is an essential ingredient for any dynamic, high-performing organisation. With effective leaders, libraries and other information services can deliver a higher standard of service to clients and adapt to the fast-changing information environment (Turner 2010).

**Leadership – what do we want?**

For some time there has been a call for developing a core set of leadership competencies for the sector (Ammons-Stephens et al. 2009; Mason & Wetherbee 2004). Ammons-Stephens et al. (2009) identify four central leadership competencies which include: cognitive ability, vision, interpersonal and managerial effectiveness.

Roberts and Black (2007) however believe that development of leadership ability is complex, more than a competency-based skill set. 'It must challenge all staff to self-develop through increased self-knowledge, personal reflection and personal challenges... Leadership involves inspiring self-belief and encouraging others to become leaders.'

The facilitators of both the Snowbird and Aurora Institutes Becky Schreiber and John Shannon (2001) have defined six critical leadership traits for emerging leaders they include:

1. Being self-aware
2. Embracing change
3. Having a customer focus
4. Creating shared vision
5. Being collaborative
6. Acting with courage

These capabilities underpin both Institutes.

Whether you subscribe to a competency-based approach or not, concepts of leadership development and practice continue to evolve. There is now a much greater emphasis placed on shared leadership and the emotional intelligence of leaders (Cawthorne 2010; Roberts & Black 2007). There seems to be a deliberate move away from and wariness of, the enigmatic, charismatic mavericks that once
dominated the business arena. Fuelled by the acknowledgement that to succeed organisations need leadership at all levels.

Leadership is considered one of the soft skills and good leadership is less palpable but obvious when we experience it. What skills emerging leaders need to be taught also remains elusive and a definitive list of leadership competencies for information professionals has not yet been endorsed by any professional association (Mason & Wetherbee 2004). However, the literature shows that most participants in leadership development programs such as Aurora are satisfied with their experience. Although Mason and Wetherbee (2004) do call for more robust and systematic evaluations of the impact of leadership programs including longitudinal studies.

Context of the study: A Conversation

I attended the Aurora Institute in 2006. Since that chilly week on a mountain nearly five years ago, I have changed jobs and moved into a more senior management role. Five years down the track and I still find myself referring to things I learnt at the Institute and I often meet up with others who attended the same year in my travels to conferences and other library related events. In fact at my current workplace there are four Aurora alumni all of us attended while at other organisations. The idea for this paper came out of a conversation whilst standing around at a conference in 2010, recharging various mobile devices.

I was curious to know whether other Aurora attendees had moved into leadership roles or taken on more senior management positions. Most importantly did they believe that attending Aurora had impacted on their leadership pathway or trajectory.

Methodology

Requests to complete the survey were sent out via social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. The response rate was low considering the number of Aurora alumni in Australia and New Zealand (400 plus). However, twenty-two of the twenty-nine who started the survey completed it.

The questionnaire is loosely based on the one used in 2003 by Kaye Barney (Barney 2004). It contains a mix of questions requesting demographic information and open-ended questions that require the respondents to reflect on their own experiences. In all there were a total of fifteen questions.

Demographics - who responded?

Of the twenty-two people who responded there are representatives from the every Aurora Institute except the first.

Most where encouraged to apply and sponsored by their employers and only nine of the twenty-two self-nominated. It is costly to attend Aurora. This is a comment from one of the alumni:

I was encouraged to nominate but not by someone within my organisation. I had discussed attending in the previous 2 years with my manager and it was made clear that my organisation would not support such a large amount of money spent on one employee, especially when Aurora is not sector specific. I should note that my employer has always been supportive of me attending other leadership activities…No one else at my institution has attended Aurora
The majority of respondents are from either academic or public libraries with only three coming from other areas.

Furthermore the just over 79% of the respondents are women which is not surprising as the sector continues to be dominated by women who represent 83.5% of the library profession (Simon 2009). The findings from the Nexus studies (Hallam 2008a) also show that in 82% of the organisations that responded the percentage of female staff is over 70%.
Finally, most of the respondents are Gen Xers with only two Gen Ys and four Boomers. Aurora is aimed at people with at least three years experience and no more than ten years since gaining qualification. Therefore, it is not surprising that in a program that targets emerging leaders, Gen Xers are highly represented. Again in Nexus Hallam (2008b) reports that 49.9% of those people with librarian qualifications are over 46 years of age and of those 46 years and under, 47.3% are between 25-45 years old.

![Figure 4 Showing generational demographic](image)

### Career Advancement

When asked about career opportunities within current workplaces over 68% indicated that there are opportunities for advancement. However, many of the respondents talk about the need to move sideways or out of their current workplaces to develop skills and gain more experience before moving up:

*We have a wide variety of activities within this organisation, allowing staff to explore new areas & develop in many ways. I think career advancement often occurs sideways, especially with team building across the organisation, creating a multi-skilled workforce.*

Another says:

*The only way up in our organisation is to leave for a better job, then move back in sideways.*

There is also recognition that it may not be healthy to stay in one workplace for too long:
there have been ample opportunities for advancement through middle to senior management. I like working here but as my next step would be to executive level, the number of positions available - both here, and in uni libraries generally - is significantly reduced. However, I also don't think staying in the 1 organisation for a long time is particularly healthy anyway, so I would view a move away as a positive career step on several levels.

Overall the respondents were optimistic about career advancement opportunities within the sector whilst acknowledging that their skills are transferrable in to other industries such as the education sector:

There are several more senior positions within my Library but also within the University in which I work. My skills and experience as a librarian would be very transferable to other university roles e.g. project officer, Faculty manager.

Has your age impacted on your advancement opportunities?

It seems that age is no barrier to advancement opportunities in most cases with only four people indicating that it had impact on their career. One of the respondents, a Gen Xer had this to say:

It feels like we are the "generation in waiting". Prince Charles to the Baby Boomers' Queen Elizabeth ... and in danger of being passed over for the younger generation of Prince Williams. Baby Boomers tend to have the management positions, with very little chance for Gen Xs to act in them.

I am concerned that when there is a mass retirement, there will be a number of us 15 years or so from retirement ourselves with very little managerial experience. This is not great for us individually and rather bad for the profession as a whole.

With the 'baby bust' just around the corner the information sector needs to ensure that staff are given opportunities at all levels of the organisation to develop their managerial and leadership skills. On the flipside the 'baby bust' can also provide openings for emerging leaders to take on more responsibility and move in to more senior roles:

I do not feel that my age has any negative impact on my… prospects. In fact as one of the youngest Librarians in the whole library network (20 special libraries) it is probably to my advantage as the majority of current Library Managers are in the 50 plus age group and will be retiring in the next 5-10 years.

Support and Encouragement

When asked about support and encouragement for developing leadership potential, all twenty-two respondents were positive. Support was offered in the following ways:

- Training and development opportunities
- Mentoring
- Project work
- More responsibilities
- Further study
- Presenting conference papers
- Attending conferences
- Publishing
- Secondments
- Involvement in professional networks

It is heartening to know that the experience of these Aurorans shows that emerging leaders are being nurtured. However, there is an element of self-motivation required by individuals pursuing leadership roles. A couple of responses touched on this aspect: ‘…my advancement to leadership was through self direction and also support of a library manager’ and another noted the need to actively seek out leadership opportunities.

**Impact of Aurora**

Perhaps the most interesting part of the study is about the perceived impact of Aurora on the participants. 80% believed that it has or would improve career prospects.

The common themes were the value of having Aurora on resumes, networking and that Aurora allowed participants to develop an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and engendered a belief in their own abilities thus leading to increased confidence:

- *Aurora gave me a lot more confidence in my own abilities and a greater belief that I could really do anything*
- *Aurora gave me some of the confidence to apply (successfully) for my current management position*
- *Gave me confidence in myself. Helped me believe I could make a difference.*

Much of the program at Aurora focuses on self-reflection, self-awareness and personal development and those that attended believe that it has had a positive impact on their career.

Other benefits of attending the program listed by respondents include:

- Exposure to role models
- Impetus to move forward
- Strategic thinking
- Courage
- Understanding of group dynamics
A whooping 95% of respondents would recommend Aurora with the caveat that it is not for everyone:

But only to people who want to be there and want to learn and develop. There were a couple of people who were nominated by their organisations the year I was there - they didn't seem to have the sense of interest or commitment that some of us others had.

It was a transformative experience for me. I know it isn't for some others, and have heard it described negatively, but it was a critical point in my career

I would recommend Aurora to people but not everyone. I believe someone has to have a certain mindset and work/career ethic in order for Aurora to be beneficial to them.

…not the faint hearted.

Since attending Aurora 55% became more active in the sector and 30% remained about the same. Many becoming more involved in their professional associations ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) and LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa).

Impact on other parts of life

The six-day residential in the words of one participant ‘can be a great opportunity for focused personal development.’ I was curious to know whether people who attended Aurora felt that it had an impact on other parts of their lives. The responses were mixed. For some people the impact of Aurora was profound leading to significant changes to their personal and professional circumstances and for others it led to self-awareness and a reassessment of their goals:

Impetus to get counselling for grief issues that were holding me back.

Aurora increased my self awareness which has carried through on all aspects of my personal as well as my professional life. I have become more confident in most of areas of my life

…personal turmoil immediately following - marriage break up, moving over seas to work for a while.
I think it's made me more aware of the behaviour I have with other people in personal relationships too.

Aurora gave me the confidence to give myself permission to set limits and prioritise work/life balance which until then were not balanced with work impacting negatively on my overall wellbeing.

changed my life goals - set me on a new path

The catalyst for a painful period of intense self-doubt in every aspect of my life.

**Impact of Aurora on leadership**

Respondents were asked for any final comments on the impact of Aurora on their leadership, for some it was too soon having recently attended and for others the memories are a bit fuzzy. But most were very positive:

*The most valuable of all of the leadership training I have had. It was also the most challenging both personally and professionally*

Fantastic opportunity. Although I have chosen to leave the industry after Aurora skills are transferable and I may move back into the industry at a later date.

*It's true what they say about Aurora - many of the lessons you are presented with, you don't actually *learn* until some time down the track. I guess for some lessons you can only learn them when you're ready. Sounds very Zen, but it's true.*

*It gave me the skills to be a leader.*

*I remain very open to new ways of accomplishing things and don't always have to have the right answer. I have sent a few of my staff to Aurora with mixed results. It's a very individual thing. I do wish that there was more debriefing afterwards*

*For me, it was the "I can" factor. For years, I saw other leaders in action, never expecting to be in that role. From a conservative background, Aurora helped me realise that "someone" must lead our organisations, and when the opportunity arises, we must give it our best shot - we can't complain afterwards, if we fail to put our hand up.*

*Aurora wasn't life changing for me as it has been for others (but then I was quite happy with my life anyway!). It has given me a good measure of where I am at in my career and what I need to do to move up or sideways*

*The initial effect of having been "marked out for great things" was a very mixed blessing. This effect has faded with time, allowing a more personal & authentic use of the actual skills rather than of the label.*

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to draw a direct correlation between attendance at Aurora and the leadership journeys of the respondents. For those who have moved into leadership roles as one person says *'I cannot be sure that I wouldn't have got where I am now if*
I hadn't attended Aurora.' It is clear however that for most the program had a positive impact on their careers, giving them more confidence, self-belief and an opportunity to refocus their goals. The program is highly regarded but is 'not a magic wand opening all doors & removing every obstacle.' The majority of those who attended would recommend the program to others and indeed some have encouraged and supported colleagues to attend, which is a wonderful endorsement. I agree with other authors who have suggested that a longitudinal study of alumni and participants in leadership programs would be beneficial and I look forward to the results of the Aurora Foundation's 2010 study into the Institute.
References


