Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way: Management Succession in Libraries

by Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer (Partners, R2 Consulting, 63 Woodwell’s Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org> <ruth@r2consulting.org>

During a recent R2 project at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, I interviewed Chris Sinkler-Miller, the Periodicals/E-Journals Specialist. Chris manages SFX for the Bridge, a catalog shared by Carleton and St. Olaf College. She has obviously mastered the SFX knowledgebase, linking, e-resource cataloging and holdings maintenance — all those tasks that help users find the electronic content they so desire.

At the time we spoke, Northfield had just experienced a world-class hailstorm, with the Minnesota sky dropping ice bombs “the size of grapefruits,” and causing massive damage to roofs and vehicles. Most staff members were driving rental cars, and Chris was no exception. Her temporary ride was a Chrysler PT Cruiser. Personally, I got a kick out of these slightly quirky vehicles when they first came out, and made an innocuous remark to this effect. Chris replied, “I hate it. It makes me feel like a boomer.”

So there it was, my “moment of Zen”, to borrow Jon Stewart’s phrase. One moment, we were professional peers, looking for improvements in the e-resources workflow. The next, I was mentally transformed into “boomer dude,” scrambling to keep up with a smart Gen X-er, and trying not to show it. It’s a moment lots of us are facing right now.

At Sea-Tac Airport, headed home from ALA, I had a related conversation with a thirty-something hot-shot who ranted about impending retirements in libraries and at vendors: “All these gray-hairs keep talking about retirement — well, stop talking and just go, already!” Within a week of that, while viewing the natural history “March of the Librarians” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td9Z27QcnoA), I was forcibly struck by the gimpiness, grayness, baldness, and generally slow pace of our tribe.

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There’s a lesson for all librarians here, but perhaps especially for us boomers. To stay in the game, we need to apply that law to our activities every day: Are we contributing? Are we learning? If not, it’s time to get up and go.