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Reflections on Leading the Social Media Team at IFLA WLIC 2022

Martin O'Connor and Saoirse de Paor

Introduction

July 2022 finally saw IFLA WLIC (*The International Federation of Library Associations World Library & Information Congress*) come to Dublin. Originally slated for 2020 a pandemic meant it took place two years later than planned. So, in July, some 2,000 library professionals from over 100 countries descended on the Convention Centre, Dublin. Amongst these 2,000 were just over 200 volunteers from all across the globe, who, under the guidance of Lead Volunteers Eva Hornung and Clare Conneally, worked alongside IFLA and the IFLA Irish National Committee, to ensure the congress ran smoothly.

This paper describes how we led one of those teams - a social media team of seven - whose job was to create content for the IFLA WLIC Communications team for IFLA WLIC website and social media.

Our shared goal was to capture the buzz and energy of what for many was one of the most exciting weeks of their professional lives.

What follows are our personal reflections on how we managed to achieve this.



Foreground: Muhammad Hussan. L-R: Cristina Baró Miró, Leonie Woodfin, Violet Fox, Louis Takács, Catherine Bodey, Vena Vuksan, Saoirse de Paor, Martin O'Connor, Mariana Aguiar, Philip Segall, Leane Bell, Erica Birchall. Inset Katie Hackett.
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Some reflections on our Leadership style

We both realised that when sharing the role of lead, it is essential to identify your shared values, goals, and approaches to teamwork to help establish a strong and collaborative partnership. From the very beginning, it was clear that our mutual ethos towards teamwork centred around open communication, trust, respect, gratitude and the creation of a safe fun space. We also worked on the basis that, in the words of Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director WHO Health Emergencies Programme, 'perfection is the enemy of good'.

We brought this into all interactions with the team. As we worked on co-ordinating the team's logistics and the allocation of roles, our joint experience enabled us to identify opportunities and gaps for effective planning.

In addition to our individual experience, our individual personalities also played a key role in how we collaborated and supported one another, as well as the team. Listening was key to understanding the needs and requirements of the wider team. As leads, it was also essential for us, and the team, that we were seen and known to be on equal terms by having our own set of assigned tasks, responsibilities, and actions. To understand how your team works and the challenges they encounter, you must be active on the ground alongside them. This reinforced our belief that each member had a place, a purpose, and a responsibility on the team that contributed to the team's overall success.

We decided early on to lead the team as opposed to managing the team. We refrained from supervising each member's methods or actions and instead provided direction and encouragement when it was needed.

American author and public speaker John Maxwell says "Leadership is influence - nothing more, nothing less". This for us encapsulates the importance of creating an environment that allows for individuals to thrive on their own terms by means of encouragement and support.

Within this style of leadership, individual members flourished while taking different and creative approaches to how they engaged with their roles and the project. We regularly shared positive feedback with the team to instil confidence and establish collegiality which became a daily routine between all members of the team over the course of the conference.

We strongly felt that it was our duty to build confidence and trust within the team, to create a safe space where concerns or challenges could be raised respectfully, to allow for error and mistakes and most importantly, to ensure it was an enjoyable experience for all.

In the end, these were the key ingredients that created an effective, engaged, creative and most importantly a highly successful team!

Reflections on the Challenges

Like all new projects there were challenges. Some we faced were:

A Diverse Team

Volunteers for the communications team were selected and assigned, based on their self-identified skills and experience by the Sub-Committee Chairs. These details were shared with us. When reviewing each volunteer's profile, it was apparent that we would be leading a diverse team with a wide combination of experience and skill-sets. This presented a challenge when coordinating our strategy as it was difficult to match specific skill-sets to specific roles as outlined by the IFLA communications team.

So, we came up with a simple yet *human approach*. We very simply asked members what roles they were interested in or felt comfortable doing. Offering each member the choice in how they wanted to participate as part of the team allowed them to take ownership of that role. It's also important to note that most individuals, when afforded the chance, will gravitate towards their strengths and what they are used to or good at doing and we were in the lucky position to facilitate their wishes.

Scope

The scope of what we had been tasked with was a personal challenge for both of us. We knew that it was going to be a massive task to condense and capture the energy, excitement and scope of an international conference into website content and social media posts that would do justice to what was happening over the week.

Like all social media and web content, which by its very nature is very public, if we got it wrong, it would have been very obvious that we had gotten it wrong. Being the public face, we had no place to hide. It is fair to say this gave us quite a few moments of concern prior to the congress.

How did we overcome this? We trusted our judgement and our team and thankfully our trust paid off.

These shared challenges and how we worked through and overcame helped the team leaders, and then the team, bond.



Reflections on Creating a Safe Space for your team

As the team had very little time to get to know one another, we utilised a simple tool - WhatsApp. We created a WhatsApp group weeks before we met in person. Our WhatsApp group functioned as a platform for coordinating a strategy and strengthening communication.

Further, this virtual group-chat also offered members of the team a place where they could get to know one another in their own time and in an authentic and organic way. It was clear that the group-chat immediately created and over time enhanced and strengthened the team's bond. It became a space where we could share concerns, thoughts and ideas as well as funny memes, positive encouragement and peer-to-peer support.



WhatsApp was both an expressive and a functional tool for the team.

For those currently leading a team or who plan on working in a similar role, we would recommend WhatsApp. It helped us develop a safe space or platform that allowed the team to get to know one another, collaborate, share, and offer support outside the more formal boundaries often associated with a professional team or working group.

Reflections on Focusing on ability and not skill alone

A specific set of skills and experience is important when working as part of a team to ensure roles, tasks and actions are carried out correctly and effectively. However, one of the key takeaways that we learnt was to simply trust in your team's ability and to not focus so much on their experience and expertise. As our team had a diverse range of skills, and skill-gaps, it was their eagerness to learn on the job, to try new things, their enthusiasm and flexibility that led to their impressive ability to perform effectively and successfully in their roles throughout the congress. We trusted our team to do the work. And they did. Brilliantly.

Final Reflection

In this paper we have shown how creating a safe working space via an open, trusting, good humoured, light touch approach has benefits for everybody.

Creating a space where perfection is not the goal creates a space where the best, or the very good, result will happen. Creating a safe space for all the team creates conditions under which the team, the project and the leaders can flourish. It creates a space where trust can flourish. Creating this space allows the team to be successful in their endeavours.

The team that trusts its leaders is more likely to perform to a higher standard and produce the best result. It is a win-win for all involved.

And to finish, we know that while this paper relates to a specific event - WLIC 2022 - we strongly believe this approach to team leadership is transferable across the sector and if utilised will produce comparable results. Trust your team and see the results!!!

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Links to relevant social media

- **Instagram**
https://www.instagram.com/reel/CgkbBOggRoo/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
- **YouTube**
https://youtu.be/o0QtXe58_uc
- **Twitter:**
https://twitter.com/leanne_467/status/1551520246586015744?s=20&t=aSgcPznkpmAhHz2ZC2NDjA
<https://twitter.com/iflawlic/status/1551923156339892225?s=20&t=aSgcPznkpmAhHz2ZC2NDjA>
https://twitter.com/birchall_eric/status/1552781232517390337?s=20&t=aSgcPznkpmAhHz2ZC2NDjA
<https://twitter.com/violetbfox/status/1551962907147124738?s=20&t=aSgcPznkpmAhHz2ZC2NDjA>
<https://twitter.com/LibraryBod/status/1552565527649951744?s=20&t=aSgcPznkpmAhHz2ZC2NDjA>
- **Example of Website report created by team members**
Helen Shenton
<https://2022.ifla.org/day-two-summary/>