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People Matters No. 9, 2013

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People matters No. 9

If, like me, you are a ‘leadership watcher’ then I’m sure you will agree that 2012 was a big year for watching leaders in action. Highlights included Queen Elizabeth II’s diamond jubilee; the Olympic Games; and the US presidential election.

Watching these leaders, one observes the differing styles and contexts of leadership; the pomp and circumstance in which leadership takes place; the symbolism of power; and the words, actions and body language of the leaders themselves.

I took away three important leadership lessons from these events. Firstly, Bill Clinton’s speech to the Democratic Convention conveyed power and credibility because he drew upon his leadership achievements and record – it’s all about arithmetic, he said! Secondly, after learning more about the fastest man on earth, I recognised that Usain Bolt is more than an elite athlete; he is also a leader, deeply committed to his community and to giving back. My final lesson came from listening to Barack Obama talk about how he likes to make decisions and, let’s face it, he has made some pretty big ones in the last four years.

All this led me to reflect on the approach to leadership which we have embraced at the University of Saskatchewan library. We define leadership as ‘using our behaviour to influence others to willingly follow an idea, process or vision for the common good’. We embrace the idea that everyone can be a leader, and we are focused on leadership at all layers and levels within the library. Through our Library Leadership Development Programme, we support our employees by offering a range of assessment tools to help us better understand individual leadership behaviours and the impact of those styles on others.

So, I ask, what is your approach to leadership? What is your style and preferred approach to decision-making? And what time have you devoted recently to thinking about your leadership style and its impact on others?

[CV box:]

Dr Vicki Williamson is Dean of the University Library at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.