

20 MAR/12



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Be Engaged, Set an Example, Be Enthused, Embrace Community: Rural Librarian Leadership Qualities

By John D. "Danny" Hales, Jr.

This post is the first in a series from the ALA Committee on Rural, Native, and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds and the Association for Rural & Small Libraries exploring qualities of leadership in rural and tribal libraries. There are literally hundreds of articles and books on being a leader. Many persons are just born leaders, but just about anyone can become one, if they are really committed.

I think being committed to rural librarianship is significantly important to being a good leader.

In my 35 years as a library director of a multi-county rural library system, I believe the following four words, can somewhat encapsulate, a guide to becoming a rural library leader. Being engaged, setting an example, being enthused, and embracing the community are all key elements of being a successful library leader.

Being engaged means a total acceptance of the full objectives of being a library director. In small towns, a vast majority of the public knows or knows of the library director. One must engage and accept, even relish that position. I personally am extremely proud of that position and take pride when I walk into a meeting and someone I do not know, says, "Hello, I know you; you're the library director, right?" Anywhere I go or any meeting I attend I want that persona to be out front. I believe when people know you are engaged, even consumed by the service or product one provides, that acceptance, understanding, and even respect are given. That acceptance can go a long way in successful librarianship.

Similar to being engaged is setting an example. I had over 45 staffers, none of whom initially had any formal training as library workers, not undergrad or graduate level. I believe setting an example for them, in professional behavior, dress, and demeanor, allowed them to absorb the message a library seeks in its community. That is, we are smart, have abilities, want to serve, and are organized. We also are continually seeking ways to improve library activities, and to improve our own knowledge to better provide services to the taxpayers. It is that example set by the director that will consciously or subconsciously help mold the staff into the type of employees that make good library service and witness to the public that the library is here to serve. By setting an example of learning, being professional, listening to staff and the public's ideas, and implementing thoughtful improvements, one is most probably on the path to being an effective leader.

I cannot say enough about enthusiasm. An enthusiastic director will be energetic, engaged, and will set good examples. When I speak at Rotary, Kiwanis, before the county commission, or just to someone in the aisle at the grocery store, I make sure my enthusiasm comes through, even on mundane, routine

topics. I am animated, I smile, I joke, but most of all I let them know how much enthusiasm we have for wanting to make their library the best it can be under the constraints provided. I want them to know that constraints will not dampen our desire to improve constantly, to listen to ideas, and to implement better strategies for service. I want them to know that we will embrace their help if they wish to be engaged in providing a high quality library system.

Lastly, I believe in small or rural librarianship one can more easily embrace many segments of the community. By that, I mean being involved in community activities that are not necessarily just library oriented. Be a member, or be active in the chamber, school advisory committees, 4-H councilor, boy/girl scouts, Kiwanis/Altrusa, art guild, community theatre, historical commission, etc. Find ways for staff to participate in community projects as well. By embracing the community and its varied needs, some outside of the traditional library activities, one becomes part of the community as a whole, and not just the paid library director. Most library directors will not have grown up in the community in which they direct and embracing the community goes a long way in substantiating that the library director cares, not just about the library but our community as a whole. One also can get a better understanding of the community needs when being involved providing opportunities for the library to expand or improve.

There is so much pride, self satisfaction and success that one can derive from being a good leader. Directing an important part of the communities services such as the library, gave me great joy. These criteria above served me and my community well, and I trust that your engagement, example, enthusiasm and embracement in some way will do the same.

John D. "Danny" Hales, Jr. is the retired director of the multi-county Suwannee River Regional Library System in Live Oak, Florida. Mr. Hales has been an active voice in the profession throughout his 39-year-long career, including serving on the Board of Directors of the Public Library Association, two terms as ALA Councilor, and Past President of the Florida Library Association, in addition to hundreds of state, regional, and national library committees. In 2010, he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Florida Library Association. He currently serves on the ALA Committee on Rural, Native, and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds.

The ALA Committee on Rural, Native, and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds addresses issues and challenges facing rural, native and tribal libraries of all kinds. It collaborates with other ALA units addressing the needs of rural communities, and serves as an advocate and partner with libraries serving rural, tribal, and native populations.

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries, Inc. (ARSL) is a network of persons throughout the country dedicated to the positive growth and development of libraries. ARSL believes in the value of rural and small libraries and strives to create resources and services that address national, state, and local priorities for libraries situated in rural communities. To learn more, please visit www.arsl.info.