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May I Ask You a Question? Lessons Learned from Interviewing Public Library Leaders

by Douglas Crane on January 4, 2016

About the Author

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What exactly does a library director do? In 2012, I was a branch manager in the Palm Beach (FL) County Library System (PBCLS). While in this position, I graduated from a county leadership program that inspired me to consider becoming a library director. I had to admit that I did not know what the job fully entailed. So I set about researching the duties and responsibilities of the position, along with identifying the traits that make a great director. I wanted real advice, not just book knowledge. But the question was how to find it?

Then I remembered best-selling author John Maxwell (who lives in Palm Beach County) sharing a story about researching leadership. First, he drafted a list of people he saw as successful leaders from different fields. Then he contacted them to arrange interviews to discuss the skills, philosophies, and experiences that helped them rise to the top. Inspired by this story, the answer to my question was obvious: to learn more about directorship, I needed to interview library directors.

My goals for the interviews were to understand the roles of the director prior to obtaining a position, to identify skills sets to refine, and to initiate professional connections beyond my library system. I started out by interviewing library directors in Florida. I must have learned something useful, because, in August 2014, I was appointed director of PBCLS. Knowing there was more to learn, I continued reaching out to other directors across the country to discuss the art and science of running the modern public library. I will summarize the themes that arose from those conversations and the personal takeaways that I have put into practice.

The Directors

The library directors I interviewed for this article (between 2012 and 2015) have a wide range of backgrounds and experience. Some oversee a single city library, while others run systems ranging from half a dozen branches up to the largest at forty locations. The executives who participated were:

Director, Executive Director, or President and CEO

- John J. Callahan (retired), Palm Beach County (FL) Library System
- Izabela Cieszynski, Newport News (VA)
- Gene Coppola, Palm Harbor (FL) Public Library
- Kim Fender, The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (OH)
- Melanie Huggins, Richland (SC) Library
- Christian Kruse, Live Oak (GA) Public Library
- Brett Lear, Sonoma County (CA) Library System
- Pat Losinski, Columbus (OH) Metropolitan Library System
- Richard MacDonald, Stoughton (WI) Public Library
- Christopher Murray, Mandel Public Library of West Palm Beach (FL)
- Skye Patrick, Broward County (FL) Library System
- Steve Potter, Mid-Continent (KS) Public Library
- Siobahn Reardon, The Free Library of Philadelphia
- Lance Werner, Kent District (MI) Library

Assistant Director

- Michelle Boisvenue-Fox, Kent District (MI) Library
- Sharon Hill (retired), Palm Beach County (FL) Library System

KEY THEMES

Finance

Given the economic challenges of the past six years, budgets were big on the minds of library directors. I was warned that bad financing and unbalanced budgets can quickly undo a director's tenure. Unfortunately, library directors rarely have a background in finance. Sharon Hill served as my mentor for many years after hiring me into PBCLS in 1998. Her main advice about directorship was to learn about the government budgeting process, since it is the director's duty to draft and defend the yearly budget. Gene Coppola admitted to me that financial skills were his soft point when he took over Palm Harbor Library, the first and only library in Florida to be funded by a Municipal Service Taxing Unit (MSTU). He too emphasized the importance of taking finance classes to understand the government budgeting process.

Not surprisingly, fundraising also had the attention of many directors. As their traditional revenue streams of property tax dollars dried up, many were forced to look for other ways to fund their programs. However, it was not doom and gloom, as many directors spoke optimistically about what they accomplished with little or no funding. The challenge of tight budgets forced them to seek innovative solutions, which led to a redefinition of the role of the library in their communities. One example comes from West Palm Beach, where in 2012 the municipal library, led by Christopher Murray, received a sizable donation from the Mandel Foundation in exchange for the right to rename the library to the Mandel Library of West Palm Beach.

Obtaining financing for operations and expansions was a key concern of many directors. Lance Werner and Michelle Boisvenue-Fox told me that the Kent District (MI) Library (KDL) must renew its operating bond levy every ten years. If it fails, the system would close down in six months. Therefore, they must keep a finger on the pulse of their community and aim for very high approval ratings, which they measure through regular polling. Timing is very important when advancing a bond item to the voters.

Personal Takeaway

In the months leading up to my interview for PBCLS director, I completed two online courses from the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson School of Government, Introductory Budget and Capital Improvement Program. The knowledge gained from these programs quickly proved useful as I moved through my first budget process. Recently, we started looking at alternative ways to get state funding for projects beyond the library state aid pot. We are compiling an education package containing \$170,000 worth of items to move through the state legislature as a way to diversify our revenue streams.

Politics

There is no escaping the political nature of the director's job. No matter if it is a city library, small rural county, or large urban system, library policies and practices will run into the political process at some point.

The scope of library organizational structures is diverse, ranging from traditional county or city departments, to standalone independent tax districts, to nonprofit enterprises. Many directors spoke of learning the art of political savvy to accomplish their goals. Again, most librarians' job experiences tend to be light on the practice of lobbying politicians or outreaching to the community leaders. By necessity, new directors must learn these skills quickly on the job. Some of the many points of political interactions include: city or county elected officials; city or county senior administrators; library advisory or governing boards; state or federal representatives or senators; and local or national political groups.

Getting along with politicians may sometimes be challenging, but Melanie Huggins reminded me that even when disagreeing with community leaders, it is important to remember that they are human beings who simply have a different point of view. Anticipating the needs of elected officials is important in order to stay one step ahead of the game. While libraries are generally nonpolitical entities, public libraries can suddenly fall into political situations. Murray stressed the importance of thinking about all sides when addressing sensitive topics. One question he asks himself when making a sensitive decision is, "Would I want to read about this on the front page of the Palm Beach Post?"

Personal Takeaway

One of my first meetings upon becoming director was with our county's legislative affairs director. Since then, I have worked with legislative affairs to reach out to the county's state legislative delegation, the group of elected officials who represent us at the state capital, to plan advocacy tours of our libraries. We prioritized bringing state legislators into the library so that they can experience the modern library firsthand. I also work to ensure the library's board is treated respectfully and that their questions and concerns are answered quickly and efficiently. The library board is a valuable resource to present policy changes to before going to the board of county commissioners.

Vision

It was clear from many conversations that a director's fundamental role is to cast the vision for his or her organization. There was consensus that public libraries must change and adapt to twenty-first-century realities. We can no longer be a warehouse of books, but instead implement new ideas to meet the community at its point of need. A challenge with developing a vision for the library is articulating it to staff members so that they are willing and eager to join in. Steve Potter was very frank about how it can be a challenge to resist the desire to move quickly towards his vision when that poses the danger of leaving the rest of the staff far behind. He believes that a constant tension when future-casting is to balance going far enough for the long term, but not too far in the short term.

One aspect of building a vision is to look beyond the library world. Kruse emphasized the importance of looking outside the library profession for ideas. He strongly believes in borrowing ideas from other sectors of the economy and applying them to the library. Lear spoke about the importance of clear communication. The director must be able to state clearly and concisely the direction the organization should go in order to bring the team on board.

Personal Takeaway

A key goal for my first six months was updating our twenty-year-old mission statement. Starting with information from the 2014 “Lead the Change” workshop, sponsored by Library Journal, I formed a committee to narrow down our revised mission statement options to six choices. Then I took the six statements on the road to every branch and division in the library system. Staff members were guided through a process to discuss the six possibilities and then rank them. After the tour, there was a clear winner—our new mission statement is: “To Connect Communities, Inspire Thought, and Enrich Lives.” The process we used to select the new mission statement ensured that all staff members had a chance to participate. We are now working on a vision statement to accompany the mission statement.

Strategic Planning

A vision with a plan is just a dream. The directors I spoke to agreed that an important role for the director is to create, update or otherwise revitalize the library’s strategic plan. Many libraries refresh their plan every three to five years, if not sooner. After all, any current plan older than five years does not address the surge in popularity of mobile technologies. A strategic plan should be simple, clear, and measurable. A lot of the discussion was made around identifying the most useful items to measure. While circulation and program attendance are still important, customer satisfaction and community outreach are also vital measurements.

Often mentioned in relation to strategic planning was the concept of the unique selling proposition, which I define as the services and resources specific to the library that are not offered by anyone else in the community. One example mentioned by several of my interviewees is measuring school readiness and early childhood learning. With a growing emphasis nationwide on ensuring that children acquire basic literacy skills before entering first grade, many libraries are initiating programs and refocusing existing classes to target young children and their parents.

In Cincinnati, Fender worked on identifying the three to five most urgent community needs that the library might successfully engage. This led to a focus on fiscal stability, an emphasis on customer service, and a dedication to literacy and lifelong learning. Strategic planning also involves finding innovative uses for old resources. In Philadelphia, Siobahn Reardon gained national attention by turning an unused kitchen facility

into the Culinary Literacy Center, which teaches literacy and nutrition in a way that is hands-on, memorable, healthy, and tasty.

Personal Takeaway

In the past, the PBCL long-range plan was shared very narrowly and used primarily as a functional document to support state aid grant requests. We are developing a new long-range plan this year that will be broadly shared with library staff members to ensure that everyone has access. We also intend to streamline the new long-range plan so that we have fewer, but more valuable, objectives and goals. We will identify our unique services and then develop SMART goals (simple, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) to carry them out successfully.

Outreach

There is agreement among directors that public libraries cannot afford to continue the old model of passive service. The days of waiting behind service desks for the public to visit us are over. We have to meet the public where they live, work, and play. The importance of reaching out to the community was emphasized by many of the directors. Suburban and urban library directors alike spoke about getting staff out of their buildings and into local community institutions, such as schools, markets, community centers, and businesses.

Riordan spoke of her initiative in Philadelphia to increase the role of the library in the community via the staff members acting as neighborhood library leaders. Librarians would spend less time behind service desks and more time out in the community meeting people where they live and work. Riordan is also planning to add community organizer positions to her staff. These positions will bring different skills sets that will support the librarians in their activities outside of the library buildings. At KDL, Werner and Boisvenue-Fox encourage staff to attend local community events, such as parades and farmers' markets, or host library meet-and-greet events to engage with the community, using light refreshments to lure them in the door.

It is also important to reach out to civic and business leaders on a broader scale. Losinski developed a strategy to reach out into his new community when he arrived in Columbus. He sent a copy of the library's strategic plan to dozens of local leaders and invited them to join him for a discussion of the document over a turkey sandwich lunch. He was surprised at the high caliber of feedback he received from this simple lunchtime meeting. The advice from the civic leaders served him well as he refined the library's core mission and vision of developing young minds. They focused their efforts on kindergarten readiness and improving grade three reading scores. He then tied the library's strategic mission to community-based outcomes rather than traditional library measures.

Personal Takeaway

During my first year as director, we began a program to embed librarians in county government. Building on the pioneering work of Jamie LaRue, the former director of Douglas County (CO) Libraries, we reached out to eight departments of the county government with an offer to provide onsite research assistance.

Departments included Public Safety, Legislative Affairs, Parks and Recreation, Criminal Justice, Youth Services, Environmental Resource Management, Purchasing, and Community Revitalization. It allowed us to expand beyond our walls to where the research was most needed within our local government. The librarians involved in this program encountered a diverse set of research needs. For example, our librarian working with Legislative Affairs researched the possible effects on Palm Beach County from lifting the Cuban embargo, the links between street lighting and crime rates, and the viability of a third major political party in the United States. Our librarians working with Public Safety received full emergency management training and are prepared to report to the Emergency Operations Center for active duty if a hurricane or other major catastrophe were to threaten the county. Their role at the center would be to synthesize information for hourly reports to county administration to facilitate better decision-making. The embedded librarian program was recognized by the Urban Libraries Council with a 2015 Top Innovator Award.

Staffing

There was strong agreement among the interviewees on the importance of building a strong team. While a happy and motivated staff makes the director's life a bit easier, it also makes for a responsive and high-performing library. However, I was warned that human resource issues can take up a lot of work time. Indeed I have learned from my own personal experience that handling sensitive issues can quickly become a new part-time job, one that may be filled with legal landmines, especially where the FMLA and ADA enter the picture.

As far as building the team, the directors I spoke to advised seeking potential employees who are flexible, have a passion for library work, and good common sense. And for keeping employees motivated, many of the directors recommended allowing staff to take ownership of their work. This approach empowers staff at all levels to make decisions in their areas of expertise. Potter explains how he sees his director role with a soccer metaphor. Administration paints the lines on the field, sets up the rules, and then staff members work out the details. This autonomy has resulted in cohesive teams that manage day-to-day operations while he focuses on the larger vision and strategy.

Of special significance to many of the directors is the development of their management or leadership team. Most senior teams developed over the course of several years. For those fortunate enough to have a team in place, conditions are right for large scale success. Many spoke of flattening the organization to cut away

middle management. They also encouraged their team to create personal and professional goals that lead them to function at a higher level.

Personal Takeaway

A few years ago I came to the realization that I am a problem-solver. My natural inclination is to be a superman who flies in to solve everyone's problems. Now I do my best to resist that temptation. For staff and teams to grow, they must face their own challenges and find their own solutions. To that end, I have begun delegating more responsibility for daily operations to my senior team. We are also identifying how we might give all library staff members more flexibility in managing their work.

Also, like many systems across the United States, we have a wave of Baby Boomer retirements occurring. I had the opportunity to fill several key management team vacancies in my first year at the same time we were restructuring and merging two divisions. This created an opportunity for change that our system had not seen in a while. We used this time to identify areas where we could create better communication and teamwork. It is also easier to make changes when positions are vacant as it creates an environment where there are more possibilities for creative options.

With a new management team in place, we have begun engaging in team-building exercises. A new practice we have begun is that, prior to our weekly meeting, we watch a lecture from "The Great Courses: The Art of Critical Decision-Making."¹ We then discuss the concepts from the lecture as they apply directly to current and past management team decisions. It has led to fruitful discussions, including most recently around the concept of "framing" as it applies to presenting a vision of the library's future. The framing effect is a cognitive bias in which people react to a particular choice depending on how it is presented, such as either a loss or a gain and thus automatically limits creativity. It led us to realize that how we presented our ideas to the staff could influence how people respond to them. We redesigned our approach to allow more opportunities for alternative viewpoints to arise from the staff presentations.

Character

One intangible item that was deemed important by the interviewees was character. Successful directors show a passion and commitment to their libraries and the profession. Most of them have served at a top level within their state association or in a national organization, including the American Library Association or the Urban Libraries Council. Strong character was seen as an asset due to the highly visible nature of the job. A public failing on the part of the director casts a shadow over the whole organization. The director's values should echo the organization's values as the position becomes the physical embodiment of the library.

Two specific qualities of strong character are optimism and empathy. Izabela Cieszynski spoke about the power of positive thinking to get through crisis. When her system's funding was slashed, she challenged her staff to turn a negative into a positive by finding ways to do more with less, which helped them maintain their level of service. Huggins placed a high value on the power of putting yourself in other's shoes to create conditions of empathy. When you understand others, many of the barriers to solutions fall away. Finally, Richard MacDonald's advice was straightforward: don't be a jerk! By that he meant don't take advantage of others or manipulate them to reach your goals. In short, the means by which you get to the end matter.

Personal Takeaway

Prior to becoming PBCLS director, I worked for sixteen years in the library system. Coming up through the ranks provided me with the opportunity to build connections with staff at numerous levels, from the maintenance workers to frontline associates, and professional and support staff. I tried to be helpful and truthful in all interactions. This laid the groundwork for solid working relationships once I assumed the director position. In addition, I am active in the profession through participation in the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN) where I will serve as Vice-President in 2016. I am also running for a regional board seat with the Florida Library Association.

Summary

As I complete my first full year as library director, I look back on it as a wonderful experience. I am fortunate to work in a library system that has a solid financial footing, strong community support, and a dedicated staff and management team. Even with early success, I know that continued professional growth is a requirement in this day and age. The ideas and advice from current and past library directors has afforded me a great leg up. I am deeply grateful for the time and wisdom each one of them shared with me. My intention is to reach deeper into professional networks to build connection and share ideas. At the same time, I am using these lessons to keep my library strong and engage more deeply with our community. I will continue to reach out to other directors and CEOs as there is always something new to learn. So beware, I may have a question or two to ask you!

Editor's Note: Hear Douglas Crane discuss his findings via our new podcast, FYI: The Public Libraries Podcast.

Reference

1. Michael A. Roberto, *The Art of Critical Decision Making (The Great Courses Series)* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2009), DVD.

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This article is on the mark. Starting with Finance under Key Themes was insightful. My name is Tracy Arner. I'm the Financial Training Program Manager at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. We



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