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So, You Want to Be a Library Director?

Six tips to help you make the jump to a successful library directorship

By Brian Kenney | May 15, 2015

Maybe you're convinced you can do a better job. Or maybe you're genuinely excited by the chance to reenergize and redirect a library. Perhaps you just want more money (not the best reason, but, okay, understandable). Whatever the motivation, you've decided your next job should be as a public library director. Good timing!

For the first time in years, director positions are opening up with more regularity. In my county (Westchester, N.Y.) alone, there have been a number of vacancies throughout the past year.



But there's an old adage: good librarians don't necessarily make good directors—in other words, the skills that allow one to succeed in developing children's services, or managing a reference staff, aren't always helpful when it comes to running a library. I disagree. Our librarian skills—the ability to listen well, do research, and know a community, for starters—are invaluable.

Still, it is true that as a director, you'll also need a set of skills that you probably didn't learn in library school. Hopefully, over the past few years you've had an opportunity to gain some of these abilities. You've watched a strategic planning process unfold, observed how a few thorny personnel issues were resolved, and participated in the creation of new policies. It's good, too, if you've managed large projects, such as a citywide reading program or an opening-day collection.

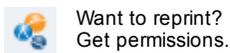
Of course, disasters are the best learning experiences for future directors. How did your director handle it when the library unknowingly booked a meeting room to that neo-Nazi organization and had pickets out front? Or when the installation of a beautiful aquarium in the children's room—a donation from a prominent family—unearthed asbestos insulation? Scenarios like these are common in running a library, and rest assured that a calamity of some kind awaits you in your first month on the job.

But we've all been there, including me, and I want to help. So, here are six tips to help you make the jump to a directorship without running to the ALA placement office after six months.

CSI: Library

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If you're aggressive in your job search, chances are you'll be applying for director jobs beyond your immediate area, where you'll likely lack any insider information. In situations like this, pull in every document you can find about the library—annual report, state report, board minutes, newsletters. Search for local news articles and blog posts. Review them as though you were half forensic linguist, half literary critic.

Start with the basics: is the staff represented by a union? If you have never worked in civil service or union environments, expect a steep learning curve. Is the library an association, or a municipal, school, or special-district library? A director's job can vary greatly depending on which library is being managed. At an association library, for example, funding can come from several sources, and securing the library's funding can be a major job in itself. A municipal library is in effect a city agency, and the director may have little control over the budget. In school- or special-district libraries, the budget goes to a vote, and directors have to make their case to the public.

You should also analyze the library's programs and services. Is the library toeing a conservative line, offering only a traditional array of activities, or is it experimenting with new formats and programs? Is the library a community center, alive with a range of community activities? Are there any major initiatives in the horizon? Is the library planning any capital projects? Long-standing directors often bow out before a capital project is launched. You will need to know as much as possible about any such projects.

Also, why is the previous director leaving? Sometimes directors move on to advance their careers, but directors often stay in their jobs for long stretches. If a library is cycling through directors every two to four years, it likely has a problem—and chances are it has something to do with the subject of the next section: the library board.

It's All About the Board

It's usually the library board that hires and fires the director, as well as evaluating her performance. Essentially, the library board will be your boss, and reporting to a group that could range from five to 20 or more members can be difficult.

Most libraries have good boards, with citizens who are committed and knowledgeable. The board can be an excellent source of advice, and a real help in introducing you to the community and easing you into the job. In the best relationships, the director and board can forge a strong partnership. Boards approve policy and set strategy. But it is the director who oversees the day-to-day operations: budget, personnel, collections, facilities, and programming. And when board/director relations break down, it's often because boards are overstepping their role, attempting to run the library.

What does this look like? I recently read an interview with someone running for the library board in an affluent community. His platform: he'd stop the library from selling off its collections, which amounted to a sale rack in the foyer full of aging bestsellers. This is the sort of micromanagement you want to avoid.

What you want is a stable board. Longtime board members can be real assets. You don't want to walk into the aftermath of a coup—such as when the whole board is just a year or two old. At the very least you should understand what caused the old board to turn over, and what the new board's agenda is.

Finally, avoid libraries where the board seems incapable of reaching consensus. Read the board minutes closely. Do issues appear again and again, never reaching resolution? Are there large problems that have dogged the board for years? Are only one or two people dominating the discussions? Does the board rarely vote on a topic unanimously? To paraphrase Tolstoy, "All happy boards are alike. Each unhappy board is unhappy in its own way."

Infrastructure

It may sound obvious, but to succeed as a director, you need support. Will you have an assistant director? Does the staff have an organizational structure that makes sense? If you can get hold of it, an organizational chart can be gold in understanding how the library operates.

For me, the most important person to have in place is the budget manager, responsible for all financial accounting, among other things. Without a good, trustworthy business manager, I'd be sunk. You also need to learn who takes care of personnel issues, IT, the library's physical plant (which, let's face it, is always falling apart), development and grant work, and legal counsel. If the library doesn't have people in these positions, or relationships in place with consultants, this work will fall back on you, and it could quickly become an untenable situation.

The Numbers

Remember that portfolio I had you gather? Pay close attention to the numbers in it. What's been happening with the library's operating budget? Is this library's budget growing, flat, or diminishing? If funding has been soft, what's absorbing the hit? The materials budget? Are vacancies going unfilled, or hours cut?

Ideally, a library should have a separate foundation with at least one staff member, although this may not be possible in smaller libraries, and many midsize libraries have yet to create this (that will be your job). But gone are the days when a library's budget can do more than just maintain the status quo. To grow, experiment, or initiate new services, libraries need to find private, foundation, or government funding. Does the library—its board and community—recognize that development is a necessity, and that it will be a focus of your directorship?

Also look at the output measures: what's happening with circulation, the number of programs being offered, attendance, and hours? Again, are the numbers growing or diminishing? What you're looking to see is if this is a library in decline. If it is, why is that so, and what will it take to turn it around? Is the only solution to pump more money into the organization? Or can the library be managed more efficiently?

Learn the Culture

Probably the most difficult thing to gauge as an outsider is the library staff's morale and culture. But few things are more important.

Are staff members encouraged to act with autonomy? In old-school libraries, only the director (and maybe the assistant director) could speak publicly for the library. Are staff members blogging? Speaking at community gatherings? Do staff members have different areas of expertise? Is the staff involved outside the library, on other local boards, or within state and national library associations?

View the library's hiring process as a microcosm for how the library operates. The best hiring processes are collegial, involving people from different levels of the organization, and perhaps the community. Do staff members seem comfortable working with one another, do they talk freely about the library's strengths and weaknesses? Or is their conversation stilted and guarded?

Try to get a sense of the previous director's management style. Was he an autocrat who holed up in his office all day, issuing memos? Was he always flying from conference to conference, panel to panel, leaving the management of the library to others? You can be sure that your predecessor profoundly affected the library's organizational culture, and as scores of *Harvard Business Review* articles will attest, that can be the most difficult thing to change. Try to learn what you may be walking into.

The Love Factor

Finally, take a good look at the community you'll be working in. Do residents support their public institutions, and do they consider these institutions to contribute to life in their city? Is there a good relationship between the library and elected officials? Is it a place you could imagine living in—whether you move there or not? After all, you'll be spending many more hours here than in your hometown, and it helps if your values are shared by your work community.

And ask yourself if this is a job you think you'll love? If you can't answer yes, don't bother applying. Directorships demand so much, and are so fully engaging, that unless the work is deeply meaningful and satisfying, it isn't for you.

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