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## When Small Is All

### The successful small public library director wears many hats smartly

By Jane Pearlmutter and Paul Nelson | December 7, 2010

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In 2007, the 9,214 public libraries in the United States served 97% of the total population, a figure that has remained steady for more than a decade.

But while large public libraries may serve the majority of Americans—nearly 75%—small public libraries offer the most outlets. The majority of public libraries (88%) are located in small cities and villages with a service population of less than 50,000, and more than half have a population service area of fewer than 10,000 people. These libraries' directors wear many hats: liaison to the board of trustees, policy maker, staff supervisor, budget director, collection and program manager. When those hats sit smartly on the chosen head, library operations run more smoothly.

#### Who runs the library?

Although there is no single standard of public library governance, the majority of public libraries in the United States, and small libraries in particular, are organized as part of a municipal government. In almost all cases, though, the library is governed by an independent board of trustees, usually appointed, but sometimes elected (as in the case of public library districts), with clearly defined statutory responsibilities. Library boards are typically made up of citizen representatives, residents of the community or service area who share three important traits: genuine interest in the library as an essential service, familiarity with the community, and general knowledge of library policies and procedures. Specific responsibilities may vary from state to state, but a board of trustees is generally given responsibility in three areas of the library's operations:

- Appointing a librarian and supervising the administration of the library.
- Adopting an annual budget and providing financial oversight.
- Determining and adopting written policies to govern the operation and programs of the library.

In a small community, recruiting a good mix of trustees can be a challenge. Most library board members are appointed by a mayor, a city manager, a county executive, or other similar official. Library directors play a role in this process through recruitment—finding people willing to serve and who make the best interests of the library their top priority. Successful recruiting can be accomplished in a number of ways, including direct contact or development of an application form. Mayors and county executives are usually pleased to receive the names of volunteers to serve on the many boards, committees, and commissions to which they make appointments. If a director doesn't get involved in seeking out potential members for the library board, he or she can end up with an appointee who lacks interest in or is unsuitable for the assignment.

The partnership between board and director works best when their separate roles and responsibilities are clearly understood and mutually respected. While the board is ultimately responsible for the big picture (determining the service program, setting policy, having financial oversight), the director administers the day-to-day operations of the library (preparing reports, managing the collection, supervising other staff).

#### Working relationships with the board

To build effective working relationships with the board, a small-library director should:

- Provide concise and timely information (agendas, reports, proposals).
- Encourage (don't force) all board members to participate in discussions at meetings.
- Confer with the board president prior to each meeting to review the agenda.
- Meet with new board members, provide them with appropriate background materials, and give them a tour of the facilities before their first meeting.

And, at the risk of oversimplifying, here's a list of don'ts:

- Arrive late or unprepared for a meeting.
- Speak in library jargon loaded with acronyms.
- Spring any surprises, such as asking board members to act on a proposal or recommendation they have not had time to consider beforehand.
- Overwhelm board members with operational details, particularly if they are outside their primary areas of responsibility.

### Working relationships with staff

At almost all libraries, the biggest chunk of the budget is allocated to salaries and related benefits for library personnel. Just as books and other library materials are judiciously chosen and organized to make best use of a limited budget, so, too, must a library's human resources be carefully selected and nurtured. Personnel issues are often the first management test of a new library director.

The board is responsible for hiring and evaluating the director, but the director is generally responsible for all other staff. While a new director would be expected to become familiar with the organization and community before embarking on, say, a strategic plan or the annual budget, he or she might not have the luxury of getting to know staff before facing a vacant position, a disgruntled employee, a workplace injury, or another staffing situation that requires immediate attention. In those situations, a director needs to be a quick study. Grab your racing cap!

It is also the director's responsibility to ensure staff present the library in a positive light and can respond to a variety of situations—from routine duties to emergencies. Including the following information in all-staff training will help staff fulfill those roles. Staff trained in those areas will demonstrate to patrons that the library is run in a professional way and help staff feel more comfortable and competent. Even longtime employees may not be familiar with all the information, and the arrival of a new director (or any other new hire) provides a good excuse for refresher orientation.

All staff should know:

- What to do in an emergency; location of phone numbers for emergency services.
- Where the fire extinguishers are and how to use them.
- When and how to evacuate the building.
- What to do in a severe weather emergency.
- What to do if someone gets stuck in an elevator, if you have one.
- How to answer the most basic questions: location of bathrooms and meeting rooms; library hours; how to get a library card.

Staff at the circulation or reference desk should be able to locate:

- An up-to-date copy of the library's policies.
- A copy of the library's current budget.
- The names of the library board members and information on board meeting times.
- Information about the library's Friends group.

Staff at the circulation or reference desk should know:

- When the library was built.
- Where the day's programs and meetings in the library are being held.
- The library's policies on fines, borrowing, and renewing materials.
- The URL of the library's website, and e-mail addresses of the library and the director.
- How to handle complaints about library materials.

- How to handle requests for information by law enforcement officials.
- How to locate the names of elected officials.
- What tax forms are available at the library.
- Types of special services (homebound delivery, Talking Books) and how to apply for them.

The library director should know:

- The names of all library board members.
- The names and contact information for the main elected officials in the library's service area (e.g., mayor, county executive, school board chair).
- The size of the library budget (and at least a rough estimate of the amounts in major categories).
- How to explain how library money is spent.

The effective boss

Being a supervisor means different things to different managers. To some it means no more than scheduling and making work assignments. If a staff member is underperforming or a conflict arises between coworkers, this type of manager does not become involved, assuming staff turnover will, in time, solve the problem. If required to do performance evaluations, the manager relies largely on standardized forms, giving most employees the same slightly-above-average rating, often without discussing the evaluation with the staff member.

The best supervisors, of course, serve as coaches rather than scorekeepers when someone is underperforming, and they know, perhaps through experience in other settings, that supervision also includes encouraging and developing positive staff relationships and helping staff find their inner motivation for good performance. They clearly communicate their goals for the library and explain how *every* position contributes to that goal.

Much literature is available on personnel management—at an individual level, where a supervisor is a mentor or coach; at a group level, where a supervisor builds teamwork and resolves conflicts; and at an institutional level, where a supervisor contributes to organizational culture. A tool identified as useful to managers interacting with staff at the individual and group levels is the performance appraisal—not the typical annual ranking form used as the basis for determining a pay increase, but a performance discussion that provides meaningful feedback to employees, helps them set goals for self-development, and acknowledges the employees' own hopes for extrinsic and intrinsic rewards.

Performance-related discussions do not require a formal, full-scale appraisal/rating system; informal coaching sessions can sometimes shape and improve employee performance before undesirable patterns set in. Good performance should always be recognized in a timely way, but it's also nice to set aside some time with an employee to go through the individual's job description, praise what has been done well, and ask what help the staff member might need to do a better job in other areas. In a small library, the supervisor may have first-hand knowledge of each person's performance, but if interaction with some staff members is limited because shifts don't overlap, it's helpful to ask around to find out how each employee contributes. Perhaps an individual's job description has been neglected; a task once part of the job is no longer necessary or is now the responsibility of someone else. A staff member in a given position is often the best resource for making job-description modifications.

When relationships between the director and the library board or between the director and staff members are rocky, the news can spread quickly in a small community and jeopardize the organization's reputation and effectiveness. A director who successfully manages both up and down, communicating effectively with all concerned, is more likely to build an organization the community will respect and support. Hats off to that!

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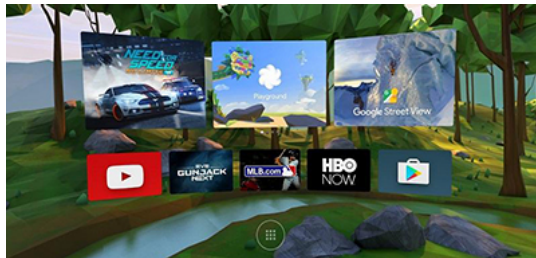
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