

WALKING THE ADMINISTRATIVE TIGHTROPE OR, "IT'S NOT A JOB; IT'S AN ADVENTURE"

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Library directors do not make policy and library boards do not direct daily library operations. The key issue in the relationship is that responsibilities of boards and directors should be divided through careful consideration and discussion. The board/director relationship can be compared to an Alexander Calder mobile: on one side with the board rests the ultimate responsibility for the library. On the other side, responsibility for the actual operation rests with the director. For the library to function effectively the board must maintain a balance with the director in a team effort. The board relinquishes authority in exchange for the knowledge and resources the professional director can bring to the team. Together in an atmosphere of trust the many functions of the library can be accomplished. The backbone of this relationship is clear, well-written library policy, including job descriptions for both parties.

POLICIES: REQUIREMENTS VS. EXPECTATIONS

It is a matter of procedure to comply with written guidelines; it is much more difficult to comply with unwritten guidelines. In the case of poorly-developed policy the director's conundrum becomes one of balancing written requirements vs. individual expectations. It is impossible to avoid differing interpretations of policies but without some identifiable parameters, there is no framework for the director-trustee relationship.

As an example, in the absence of clearly written guidelines, a director may believe that he or she can make all of the purchasing decisions for the library. The director who has no policy on purchasing out of pocket materials also has no idea if in an emergency she can purchase \$50 or \$1000 worth of materials or services. In such a case, a director's decision to purchase may come into question. Some amount of specificity is also valuable: Is discretionary purchasing power applicable to only materials, or does it extend to furniture and equipment? In any granting of discretionary privilege, there is a lot of trust involved. No director wants to be monitored every step of the way; if that is the case, then there is no need for any policy. Well-developed policy keeps clear matters clear and it provides a written basis for discussion for those which are unclear. But when policy has to be referred to every step of the

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way, something is seriously wrong because policy doesn't run the library; the director does.

Board members have a legal responsibility to the community to see that the library operation makes the best possible use of public funds. They should come to the job trying to strike a balance of support from loyal patrons who take advantage of library services and non-users who might see library funding as a drain on their resources. Property taxes always seem to be a focus of criticism from taxpayers and legislators. The library director must balance the funds provided by the board through a good budget taking into consideration salaries, material maintenance, utilities and other expenses. In framing the guidelines that give the director flexibility to do the job, consider this: Too-rigid policies are useless. If the director's every move is going to be dictated there is simply no need for a professional in the position. Since interpretation changes from person to person the key is to have guidelines which are clear but flexible. Guidelines which are too broad are also open to broad

interpretation. This doesn't say that an understanding library board working with an experienced professional can't work without specific procedures; what it does say, is that with the right guidelines, there is an opening for change and flexibility in addition to a limit to responsibilities.

A SHARED ROLE: COMMUNITY ADVOCACY TEAMING

Directors share the essential responsibility of community relations with their trustees. The library board is a window on the community; it's make-up says of the community: "This is who we are." Director/board teamwork on the community level starts right here: Board members serve as essential conduits to community figures who are in a position to advance library causes. In their positions as appointed liaisons to the library, "working" board members likewise serve as the library liaison in other arenas of community life: as Boy Scout leaders, park board members, church or community foundation officials, as soccer coaches, and school or business leaders. In these roles board members are an "ear" for the director on how it's playing in the community. They open the door for the director to be able to get other people involved. Board members should achieve the essential contacts which form strong

community/library relationships and which are a valuable meter for monitoring our progress toward our goals. They come to the table as volunteers and as a cross-section of the community. As such they bring awareness of community needs and serve as conduits of information from the various contacts they have made. The director needs this input to balance the design of library services: adult programs vs. children's programs, books vs. nonprint materials. The director can also draw on the specific expertise that individual board members may have in areas of education, automation, buildings, maintenance and finance. A longtime school administrator, for example, brings essential skills to the budget process. A trustee who is also a computer consultant is a valuable resource in a library's automation process.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION: THE RELATIONSHIP MODEL

Good policy is not a replacement for effective professional working relationships. Written guidelines are the relationship's foundation. However while the policies represent guidelines by which we run the library, communication represents how we implement those guidelines. There is a critical difference between the policy that sets the guidelines for the business and the communication which realizes the spirit of the policy.

Balance on the "mobile" is maintained with timely communication between board and director. A board should be expected to give more cooperation if they feel confident their decisions are based on a true picture of library operations. The trust that will develop when the board is fully informed of each success encountered, will reinforce the teamwork needed for the library to accomplish its goals of service to the public. Appropriate forums for communication include committee meetings, monthly trustee meetings and performance reviews. A good director also welcomes informal contacts: everything doesn't have to be dictated by formal policy. Good board members are library users; a director welcomes their coming by the library to check on the operation. Informal phone calls and attendance at library-sponsored programs are valued contacts to directors. It's a fortunate director who is the recipient of a morning-after-the-board-meeting call from her board president where the subject is, "Okay, what'd we leave out last night?" It says, we're human, we both make mistakes and it's a hard job we're doing, check me on this. It says, we're in this together! When discussion and conclusions can take place in a committee setting or through informal communications, monthly meetings can serve as a forum for action on committee and director recommendations. Here then is the demonstration of trustee-director teamwork: that the orderly progression of isolating issues for review, and the discussion and conclusions which evolve, can reasonably lead to mutual recommendations. These can then go to the full board for a vote, and make their happy way into the minutes and policy of the library;

making way for the next and newest issues, which we know are never in short supply.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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