



Working with the Director

How the Board interacts with the library director can have as much impact on library services as anything else the Board does. The two must work together closely, but they have very distinct areas of responsibility. Building a relationship of mutual respect and clear communication will ensure that both the Board and the director can do their jobs well.

The first thing to realize in working with the library director is that the director reports to the Board as a whole not to individual trustees. Therefore, a trustee cannot give orders or suggestions to the director unless the action is approved by the entire Board.

While the library director reports to the Board, the Board does not supervise the director's day-to-day activities. The Board's role is to define the director's duties in a written job description and perhaps prepare an annual work plan based on the library's long-term plan (see Chapter 15-2, Planning for the Future). It is then up to the library director to determine how she or he will perform those duties.

That said, the Board still needs to be aware of what the library director does as part of the Board's accountability to taxpayers. The Board should conduct an annual evaluation of the director's performance (see Chapter 10, Evaluating the Director, for detailed information) but the Board needs to have additional processes for staying current on the director's activities. For example, the Board can ask for a monthly report from the director.

By asking questions and showing an interest in what is happening at the library, the Board shows that it cares about the library and the director. As in any work situation, expressing interest and respect increases morale and productivity.

Motivation

A good employer knows how to motivate valuable employees. Although the Board and library director do not have a typical employer/employee relationship, the Board still has a role to play in keeping the director motivated to do his or her best job possible.

Different people are motivated by different things. The Board will have to learn what the director values and desires. For instance, does he or she value a challenging position above all else? Is recognition important? What about child care, additional staff members or increases in pay? After asking the library director what is important to him or her, and why, the Board can try to find a way to make it happen.

One simple thing that helps keep people motivated is acknowledging their accomplishments. Be specific. Rather than saying, “Good job,” for example, say, “I like how you handled that angry customer. Your patience, willingness to listen and determination to solve the problem kept the situation from escalating.” By being specific, you show respect and caring.

Salary and Benefits

Compensation is often the hardest issue to deal with as a Board trustee. Although wages are a basic element in job satisfaction, low pay is a problem in the library field as a whole and particularly in rural areas where city and county budgets are tight. Nonetheless, it is up to the Board to try and ensure that the director receives a competitive salary and benefits. The director is a key factor in the quality of services a library can provide its community, and a director who is well satisfied with the position is likely to do a much better job of serving the community than one who is unhappy.

To determine if your director’s salary should be increased, compare it to that provided by other libraries of the same size as well as to the compensation paid to department heads in other public and private organizations. If the salary is too low, talk to the appropriate government officials about increasing it. Perhaps more of the budget can be allocated to the director’s salary, or the budget can be increased. It may take several attempts for your efforts to bear fruit.

Once the base salary of the director is improved, the Board should address raises and benefits. Cost of living raises are standard elements of a fair compensation plan. If the library is not part of a government compensation system, health insurance is another benefit to consider.

If the library simply cannot afford to offer standard raises and benefits, the Board can compensate the library director in nonmonetary ways. Consider giving the director some time off with pay, for instance. Trustees can also always publicly acknowledge the director's hard work, as well as volunteer for projects that lighten the director's responsibilities.

The Board's efforts can make a big difference in the library director's working conditions. Remember: being an advocate for the library also means being an advocate for the director.

Continuing Education

Because librarianship is always changing, it is important that the library director stay informed about innovations and advancements in the profession. Continuing education is the best way to do this. In fact, the director is required to participate in continuing education under the Public Library Standards, which the library must meet to be eligible for state aid. The standards state that directors must be certified through the Montana Library Certification Program. Certification and renewal of certification both specify the number of continuing education credits required and the time allowed for earning the credits. (See Appendix B, The Public Library Standards, and Chapter 7-9, Hiring the Director, for more on the Montana Library Certification Program.)

Because the continued education of the director is so important, the Board is strongly encouraged to support the director's efforts to attend training. This includes both approval of time off with pay to travel to workshops and conferences, and financial assistance for registration fees and other expenses. A director should not be asked to attend continuing education opportunities on personal time or at personal expense. A director who is well trained and who continues to learn about the library profession is an asset to the library and the library's patrons.

Common Missteps

There are legal limits to what the Board can ask of its library director. One of the most common mistakes made by Boards is asking the library director to work more hours than she or he is paid for. Many library directors go above and beyond what is required and give extensively of their personal time to the library without being asked to do so. As a Board member, not only should you not ask them to volunteer their time, you should make it a goal to see that they are paid for actual hours worked.

Some trustees will ask the library director to work holidays reasoning that the director is being paid for the day and so should work it. In some cases, this is illegal. It can also be demoralizing, especially if the director already receives few benefits as is the case in many libraries in Montana.

Finally, don't micromanage. After the Board and the library director have agreed on the director's job responsibilities, the Board must let the director take the lead. Problems need to be addressed, but even in these cases, the situation needs to be handled with respect. Step back and ask yourself if there really is a problem or if the situation is just a difference of opinion or style. There are different ways to reach the same goal of providing the community with excellent library services.



Working with the Library Staff

Although decisions by the Board affect working conditions, salaries and other aspects of typical employer/employee relationships, you as a trustee need to understand and respect the chain of command in which the director reports to the Board and the staff reports to the director.

Under this structure, the Board:

- ✓ has no direct responsibility for day-to-day supervision of staff other than overseeing the director. Board members have no authority to issue orders to staff or make demands of them except through the director.
- ✓ has no direct responsibility for assessing staff performance other than that of the director. The director is expected to give the Board regular reports about staff performance.
- ✓ does not usually act on complaints from the staff. Should a staff member ignore the command structure and take concerns and complaints to a trustee, or the entire Board, it is the trustee(s)' responsibility to remind the individual about the proper procedure.

This command structure is designed to make things work, not to hinder communication. Failure by any trustee to adhere to this structure can result in organizational problems. Not only is the director's authority compromised, so too is the director's job performance. The Board will not be able to hold the director accountable for staff performance if trustees get involved in staff management.

In addition, staff morale will be damaged. Staff will not have a clear understanding of who is in charge and to whom they will be accountable. And once the precedent is set, staff will believe they can go to the Board with every issue, resulting in the director becoming an ineffective figurehead without real authority.

A Team Effort

Acceptance of the command structure does not mean that a wall is placed between the Board and the library staff. The Board, director and staff need to view themselves as part of the same team, with the same mission - service.

Board members may often work with the library director and staff members on committee work. All are involved in long-range planning and building community awareness and support.

As a trustee, you should show concern for the well-being of the staff. The Board should be concerned about retention of good staff, especially as it relates to budgeting pay and benefits. In addition, the Board should work with the director to recognize and acknowledge good performance and say thanks to staff through specific Board action.

Adapted from The Board Team Handbook: A Complete Guide to Boardsmanship Basics for the Board Team of the 90's, published by the Cain Consulting Group, 1992.