



The Roles of a Consultant in a Cooperative System Headquarters

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THE CONCEPT OF "larger units of service" is not new to the library world. The *Post-War Standards for Public Libraries* reiterated what had been the general feeling for some years: that a library unit had to have a minimum income of \$25,000 and had to provide service for a population of 25,000 to be anywhere near effective.¹ Both the *National Plan for Public Library Service*² and the *Public Library Inquiry*³ took full cognizance of the need for some type of coordination and cooperation among libraries if service was to be improved. In 1956, *Public Library Service* raised the base population to 100,000 and produced what has subsequently become the most quoted paragraph in library literature:

Libraries working together, sharing their services and materials, can meet the full needs of their users. *This co-operative approach on the part of libraries is the most important single recommendation of this document.* Without joint action, most American libraries probably will never be able to come up to the standard necessary to meet the needs of their constituencies.⁴

Although the concept of larger units of service has been with us for many years, the literature has been directed toward the governmental aspects of the problem, viz., the organization, financing, and administering of the proposed systems. An unstated basic assumption in all the literature is that, given the good will of the individual libraries and money from some source, a system could come into being without presenting any unusual problems. In short, basic principles could be applied to any type of library organization. That wolves lurked in the forest to harass Little Red Riding Hood on her errand of mercy seems not to have occurred to anyone.

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The wolves are not new to the forest—they have been there all along, but have never been identified as such. When a previous passer-by disappeared into the deep forest, it was easy to find excuses, none of which had anything to do with the dangers of the trip. These predecessors were able librarians who became directors, coordinators, supervisors (call them what you will) of special services in the large county or city libraries. When they failed at their jobs, the excuses made were that they missed the public, felt too far away from the books, or disliked all the paper work. Actually, they failed for the same reasons a consultant can fail, and when they succeeded it was for the same reasons a consultant can succeed. With one notable exception, there is no difference between being a good coordinator of children's services in a large municipal public library and being a good children's consultant in a cooperative system.

The exception is in the nature of the relationship between the coordinator of a metropolitan system and the people he is working with; they are all employees of the same governing body, and the coordinator, at least theoretically, has the authority to fulfill his responsibilities. The consultant in a cooperative system has no authority at all—just the responsibility to help improve library service at the local level. This demands that he be everything the coordinator is—but be it more tactfully.

Because of the similarities, it should have been an easy task to provide the new consultant with a clear-cut idea of his role (or, more accurately, roles) by referring to the older, established metropolitan or county libraries. However, as Elizabeth Gross showed quite graphically, there is no single pattern of library organization even among similar types of libraries.⁵ Furthermore, large libraries tended to develop dynasties rather than job definitions. One can read every word written by and about Anne Carroll Moore without having the faintest glimmer of what she actually did on the job, except inspire people. Prince consorts and heirs-apparent were selected by the leaders in every area of library administration and were nursed along until the leader retired. No one ever seemed to feel it was necessary to spell out these roles; they were acquired by osmosis and taken for granted.

The roles a consultant plays are numerous, but they are no different from the roles of other librarians. It is simply a matter of emphasis, selection, and priority that makes the consultant's job different. The following list of roles is not definitive, but does point up the variety inherent in the consultant's position: communicator, innovator, listener,

observer, interpreter, trouble-shooter, peace-maker, psychologist, demonstrator, planner, coordinator, and educator. To find individuals with all these sterling qualities who also possess a sense of humor and a gleam in the eyes is the problem of the library director. It is not a simple task, and is made more complicated by the circumstances in which library systems have typically developed.

The formation of a library system requires intensive work on the part of many people. State agency consultants are at work; local librarians and local boards of trustees are involved intimately, and citizens' committees are quite often active in the planning stages. A tremendous expenditure of energy goes into the process of acquiring the consent of the libraries to agree to form a system. In the process, many of the librarians and trustees come to know each other, and certain barriers are broken. By merely consenting to join a system, the library has taken the first step in acknowledging its need for help and its willingness to accept it when offered.

The job of the headquarters staff would be much easier if the system could spring into immediate action. However, after the appointment or election of a system board of trustees, a director must be selected, a plan of service formulated, and a staff hired. The recruitment of qualified personnel and the setting up of physical headquarters requires months, if not a full year. Consequently, there is the inevitable let-down of enthusiasm among the member librarians.

Depending upon the potential size of the system staff, the recruitment of consultants will fall into two categories: the jack-of-all-trades consultant who knows a little bit about a lot of things and is willing to learn more about everything; and the specialist. The smaller systems have to settle for the former; the larger systems often begin with a full complement of specialists. It is an interesting aside to note that when smaller systems do feel they can afford a specialist, the first priority is assigned to a children's specialist.

Even after the staff has been hired, the problems are not easily solved. The first consultant hired may be the one who makes policy for the entire system headquarters staff—not by planning it that way—but, in the best John Dewey method, "by doing his job." As yet, there is no clear consensus about what a consultant should or should not do. Within the same system, consultants will differ in the way they approach their jobs. There is, however, a consensus as to what they are working toward. Only the methods and, perhaps, the priorities are in question.

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Put in its simplest terms, the goal of the headquarters staff is to improve library service at the local level in each of its member libraries. One visit to each of the member libraries produces a clear-cut checklist of needs, e.g., book collections need weeding, current buying practices need improvement, replacement buying must be encouraged, and standard titles must be added to produce something resembling a balanced collection. Organization of the collection is often necessary. Card catalogs are not universal, nor are shelving arrangements always logical or even systematic. Income is in need of being raised, or in some cases instituted. There is often a need for better community relationships and for programming to alert the community to the services the library can offer. In fact, there is no area of library organization and administration that may not require improvement.

For the majority of new consultants, this first glimpse into the problems facing them is nothing short of traumatic. Of necessity, they have been recruited from consolidated systems where they have learned to take the fundamentals of library service for granted. They may be experts in an area of specialization, but they are used to working within a framework of boss-to-employee relationships, for even the most democratic façade of the consolidated system does not hide the fact that once decisions have been made by the administrative staff they are expected to be put into effect.

This initial period is the most crucial for the consultant staff, individually and collectively. Decisions made in the early days of a system's growth must be lived with, if not forever, at least for many months and years. It is not easy for consultants to take the time to think when everything around them calls for action. Some of the member libraries will be pressing hard for immediate help in all areas of service; some will feel they have done their job by joining the system and will be difficult to reach; others will be sitting back, ready to see "what's in it for us?" It is essential in any new organization to implement a concrete form of immediate action that will please the members while building toward long range improvement that will be far more meaningful. In short, the staff must evolve a program that produces immediate results without losing sight of the fact that its primary purpose is to make the local librarian competent to cope with all but the most difficult problems.

The greatest temptation facing the consultants will be to become doers instead of educators. To yield to this temptation is to point the way to catastrophe, and it must be avoided at all costs. For example,

if Library A's librarian asks for someone from the headquarters to come and weed the adult nonfiction collection, it is easier for the responsible consultant to go and do the job himself than to train the librarian to do the job. And since not all, or even many, of the member libraries are apt to ask for this service, it is easy to fall into the trap of doing just that. Perhaps the first lesson a consultant learns is to not do for one library what he could not do if all libraries were to ask for the same service. Not even the most competent consultant, with limitless energy, could weed the collections of thirty or more libraries in a year or even two years. And since this would be only one small portion of the total job that needs doing, the strain would be unbearable.

Communication is the most essential ingredient necessary to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. The librarians must be brought together as often as geography, weather, and transportation allow. Meetings serve so many purposes that it is impossible to see them as other than absolutely essential. The consultant, coming from a large system, surrounded by other professionals, subjected to regular stimulation by the interaction of the staff, will have a firsthand recognition of the isolation the one-man librarian has always felt, when he discovers his loneliness in being deprived of the stimulation he has taken for granted. He will appreciate the inner need of people to communicate, the perspective gained by simply knowing that other people have similar problems.

How the meetings are arranged, monthly, bi-monthly, or even quarterly, will depend upon the transportation problems of the area more than by any other consideration. The system staff should take some responsibility in arranging rides for librarians who do not drive and either have no public transportation available to them, or, not unlikely, are too old to be expected to travel alone. Some systems pay their librarians mileage to and from the system meetings. It requires a particular skill to get the librarians who most need the meetings to attend. If all attempts at luring them to meetings fail, there is always the gambit of asking them if the meeting can be held in their libraries. If the local library is too small, there is always a church hall or grange hall available, and a librarian cannot very well stay away from the meeting at which he is host. In fact, it is a very good idea to rotate the meeting places as a matter of principle. It is as important for the local librarians to communicate among themselves as it is for the headquarters staff to communicate with the librarians. And there is nothing quite like seeing the other fellow's library to help ease this process. It provides

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ideas for solving problems, or, at least, produces a mutual sympathy society.

The physical arrangements for the meetings are more easily solved than the content for them. Too often, the consultants attempt to transpose the framework of the metropolitan system's meeting onto the cooperative system meeting. The temptation is to devote the meeting exclusively either to book selection, if that has been the pattern the consultant knew in his former position, or to the petty details of changes in the charging system or a new arrangement for returning interloan books. Neither is entirely satisfactory.

In the first place, consolidated system meetings are generally run by and for specialists. The branch librarians meet one week, the children's librarians the next, and so on. It is a very fortunate cooperative system that can plan for separate meetings. For most of the systems, the one monthly meeting must take care of the entire library program. It may be decided to rotate the subject matter, or each specialist or consultant may be allotted time to discuss his particular responsibilities. All these decisions can be made only on the basis of intimate knowledge of the local librarians, their needs, and, most important of all, their desire. In "Side Glances," a cartoon by Galbraith, the attitude of many librarians was summed up nicely. It showed a club meeting, with one woman whispering to another: "I'm not here to form any new opinions. I haven't aired all my old ones yet!"

Whatever the decisions, the first basic principle is that the staff should devote no time to items which can be just as effectively conveyed by the printed word as by voice. It is true that not all the librarians will read communications from headquarters. Not all branch librarians in the large metropolitan systems read their mail either. However, the moment the consultant staff begins to plan meetings for the worst of the librarians instead of the best, a serious mistake has been made. A teacher of adults discovers this rapidly. The enthusiasm of intelligent, interested members *can* arouse the interest of the more passive librarians, but appealing to the least of the group will only result in dragging down or driving away, the active librarians.

One newsletter type communication per month should take care of the details for the staff. It is preferable to have a single, known form of communication rather than a deluge of materials which will soon become so overwhelming that the librarians will tend to throw them away or file them unread.

Each meeting must be an educational occasion for its participants,

and this means for the consultants as well as the librarians. The ability to listen to opinions, to observe who goes to lunch with whom, or who sit together, will pay off in human relations. Such observations may well save the consultant from many an embarrassing moment, and he should be sensitive to them.

If the meetings are balanced to include discussion of practical problems as well as book selection, the basic principles must be stated and restated during the discussions. Even the most highly educated, intelligent people can turn a meeting into "show and tell time" if the consultant is not on his toes to bring out the general principle behind the individual's story of "how it is in my library." The consultant is constantly striving to help the librarians see their problems as general problems of the library world and not individual harassments.

A final suggestion for the conduct of meetings is that the book selection list should be kept as small as possible. Librarians should not be encouraged to buy the merely mediocre current titles when their collections lack the best of the established titles. For example, in the children's field, it would not be cheating to list *Johnny Tremain*⁶ on a buying list if a current title is being compared with it. Replacement buying in a consolidated system is highly organized, but in the co-operative system it can be extremely casual with great effectiveness. It is true that this approach does not offer the chance to rejuvenate the collection all in one sweep, but then, most of the libraries do not have the money to make this step anyway.

There are two problems which offer the greatest opportunity to see the complexities and perplexities facing the consultant staff. The first concerns internal relationship, e.g., between the consultant staff and the local librarians. The second is external and concerns the consultant's role in relationship to the patrons or communities of the member libraries.

Librarian A has asked for the adult nonfiction collection to be weeded. The responsible consultant should give Librarian A the opportunity to explain why he wants the collection weeded and what he thinks is wrong with it in its present state. Only after the consultant has listened long and carefully is he in a position to know whether this is the opportunity for which he has been looking. If the major reason given for wanting the collection weeded is because the board of trustees has suggested it, beware. The suggestion should be the librarian's, although it is essential that the board approve. No ordinary

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library procedure has quite the built-in emotional problems of throwing away books.

When the decision is made to weed Library A's collection, the next step is to recruit other librarians in the area to observe the demonstration, for it is a demonstration, not a completed project. The least problem will be finding a time when the library is closed to the public—it is closed for many more hours than it is open if it is an average small library. The biggest problem is in convincing the board of trustees that it is going to have to begin paying the librarian for hours worked when the library is not actually open to the public.

This is the perfect opportunity for the library director to educate the system's board of trustees in the intricacies of library work behind the scenes. A recommendation from the system board to all local boards that payment for work behind the scenes should be made will have more effect than if the suggestion comes from either an individual consultant or the staff in general. The machinery for producing this success is an example of how important it is for the consultant to keep the entire staff informed about his activities and their implications for the total system. There must be continual feed-back from the consultant to the staff and to the director.

At the monthly meeting preceding the weeding date, the opportunity should be taken to set forth principles of weeding and to establish criteria that will be acceptable to most of the group. This is an excellent time to go into standards of authority, scope, and accuracy of nonfiction in general. Establishing the principles in the group situation helps to generalize the problem rather than to make it a specific problem applicable only to the library about to be the scene of the demonstration. This also gives the librarians involved a chance to think about the problem in a depersonalized atmosphere.

The only real danger is in setting the standards for weeding too high. The general characteristics of the collections can only be described by Hyman Kaplan comparisons: bad, worse, rotten. One is never able to weed these collections ruthlessly; many mediocre and poor books will remain after the job is over, particularly if they are in good physical condition. It is next to impossible to throw away a book that has all its pages and is still attached to its cover. It will be hard enough to throw away the dirty, torn books. And when the book is the only one owned by the library on a subject, regardless of its inaccuracies, outdatedness, or condition, the chances are it will stay. The consultant is always looking for an acceptable compromise be-

tween his professional standards and what the situation calls for pragmatically. He cannot afford to give up the former; he cannot ignore the latter. He walks a tightrope between despair and cynicism.

While all of this is going on between the individual consultant and the librarians, the system director or the consultant should be arranging for the loan of a collection of bright, new books to help fill the gaps, and to demonstrate that it is not the number of books but the quality of them that determines circulation. Whether these loans come from the state agency or the system headquarters is unimportant. The main point is to get new life into the collection.

Simultaneously, work is being done with the host library's board of trustees to insure that they fully understand what is going on and why. It is usually the library director's role to educate the trustees since they all too often lack faith in their own librarian's ability, sometimes quite rightly, but more often wrongly. The board must be made to see that it is its responsibility to provide money for replacement buying. When budgets are as inadequate as they are in most of the libraries, priorities must be established concerning the proportion of money to be spent on new, untried books, as opposed to those which are established titles. In some cases, the library director will arrange to meet with the local board at one of its meetings; he may go alone (in a small system, he may be the consultant doing the job), or he may take the consultant concerned with him. This, again, depends on the individual situation.

How the system staff suggests that the local board allocate its money depends on how the system has previously determined the nature of its own collection. In the New York State system concept, there are two distinct collections, one compulsory, the other optional. Each system must develop a collection, usually housed in the designated central library, of 100,000 adult nonfiction volumes. Some of the systems have also developed their own collections for loan to the member libraries on a rotating basis; the development of such collections seems essential to this author.

The only question is that of the nature of the collections. Here again, the staff is faced with a decision with which it must be willing to live. If it decides to buy the ephemeral material for lending to the libraries, thus purchasing large quantities of mysteries, westerns, best sellers, and nonfiction of passing interest, it must conscientiously work toward making sure the local libraries are spending their money on the more solid materials. On the other hand, the Pioneer System in New York

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lends to its member libraries those materials too expensive to be a normal part of the buying pattern of the small libraries. It has reported great enthusiasm for its practice of lending collections of expensive art books.

Now, having simplified the problems of weeding collections, let us look at the problem of external communication and relationships. Again, we begin with the local librarian asking a particular consultant to talk to the local P.T.A. or the Kiwanis. Here again, the temptation is simply to say "Yes," and to do the job. With one major exception, a consultant who accepts an invitation to perform at the local level is making a serious mistake. That one exception concerns talking about the system, what it is, how it operates, and what it hopes to achieve.

One of the goals of the system staff is to improve local support for libraries and to increase respect among the townspeople for the local librarian. A talented, skillful consultant who goes out and gives a polished speech may go home with a warm glow, but he has undercut the struggling local librarian who, while originally enthusiastic about the presence of the consultant, leaves with an increased inferiority complex. He says to himself: "I could never do that," and he probably could not. But he can be taught (though again there are exceptions) to be a reasonably competent speaker at a group meeting. If the librarian is really a hopeless case as a potential public speaker, a member of the board of trustees may be the logical person to be selected. Or, a member of the local "Friends of the Library" may be the right person. It is the consultant's job to find the right local person, offer help and advice, and see to it that the local person gets the opportunity to develop as a speaker.

It is safe to say that the more a consultant is known to the general public, the less well he is doing his job. Special workshops can and should be held to provide the necessary pointers for the local librarians on public speaking. There is no real magic to it; the principles can be taught, and almost everyone can learn how if he is truly enthusiastic about library work.

By this discussion of just two aspects of the consultant's role, it can be seen that no action is isolated, and decisions made on all level influence, for better or worse, decisions made on all levels. Ideally, the system decisions, since they are approved by a board of trustees representing the member libraries, should not conflict with local decisions. One says "ideally," because librarians and boards tend to retain their

former habits regardless of how new circumstances dictate changes should be made.

To improve library service at the local level is not an impossible job, but it is not, and cannot be, an easy one. The consultant staff must have a clear-cut idea of its goals and a general agreement as to the methods which will best achieve them. Methods will differ from system to system. However, they will always incorporate the basic premises. Communication is essential; the more, the better. The consultant should avoid falling into the trap of doing the job himself, remembering always that he is a teacher. He must be a good listener, with the patience of Job. He must know when compromise is the better part of valor. Tacked to the wall of every consultant's office should be the AA's serenity prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

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