

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY DIRECTOR

SHARON M. GARROU

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Who should run the library? Who should run the zoo? Who should run the museum? Is an expert in each field needed to run the organization? No! Non-profit institutions need managers, not librarians, zoologists, or art historians to run these organizations successfully. Experts in the field are certainly needed to provide technical support, but the head of the organization needs a nose for business and an ability to provide visibility and public clamor more than a knowledge of bibliographic methods, animal anatomy, or the nuances of 18th-century watercolors. In cities across the country, non-profit businesses have been run successfully by non-professionals. It is time to determine what type of director would be best for public libraries.

Libraries in particular have changed greatly from their original purpose as a depository for important cultural information. In addition to that responsibility, libraries provide entertainment, educational materials, technology, and much more, for the people of their cities. Populations are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and require their public funds to go toward institutions that they believe are benefitting them. Libraries cannot survive unless they change to accommodate the needs of their communities, and library directors must be able to respond to the needs of the times. No longer can a library director sit in his office and catalog books all day. Today, directors must be willing to make contacts outside the library, raise funds, and represent the library system. There is hardly any time in the day for a library director to perform traditional library duties.

The patterns of library management have changed over the last two decades, with the focus shifting from internal to external responsibilities (Baughman, 1980, p. 1358-9). This change requires library directors to perform different roles and to possess different qualities than in the past. Cities have become larger and more complicated, and the library director's role should change accordingly. The important roles of the library director are 1) managing the library, 2) knowing the needs and desires of the community, 3) representing the library in the community, and 4) generating funds for the library.

1. MANAGEMENT OF THE LIBRARY

The library director is responsible for the management of the library system, a large non-profit institution. The library can be viewed as a business, with the product being the services that the community desires. The library without services is merely a depository of information, and is not responsive to the needs of the public.

The library director must be aware of some of the "constraining characteristics" that are inherent in non-profit enterprises. Because service is intangible, customer influence can be weak and resource providers can intrude, (Newman & Wallender, 1980, p. 90-91) managing a library is different from managing a for-profit business. Libraries cannot depend on traditional measurements of businesses (e.g. profit) to gauge their success. Despite this, libraries should be run as a business in many respects, such as keeping close tabs on efficiency, matching the product to the audience, and increasing financial support.

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The most important skill that the library director should possess is non-profit management experience. This includes the ability to manage people, resources, money, and time. The director must have experience in non-profit management because of the unique constraints and characteristics that non-profit institutions possess.

The library director must run the library with efficiency, because the library is typically under-funded and resources are scarce. The director should be able to maximize the resources that are available by acting in an entrepreneurial way, reallocating resources in such a way that patron benefits are increased with no increase in funds (Carrigan, 1993, p. 200). With funds becoming more scarce daily, the library director must be able to think creatively to generate new solutions to resource constraints. This means that the library director will be responsible for thinking in an innovative way and for creating solutions to financial problems.

Finally, the library director needs to surround herself with people of high quality (Goldhor, 1989, p. 310). The director should have a cabinet of experts, much like a president does, to advise and offer suggestions in their areas of expertise. These experts would have library degrees and would be responsible for different services within the library. These services would include reference, children's, and technical services, and the heads of each would report directly, and frequently, to the library director. These individuals would also act as eyes and ears of the library, to aid the director in determining the community's needs and wants.

2. KNOWING THE NEEDS AND WANTS OF THE COMMUNITY

The place of the library director is not behind the desk, but rather in front of the citizenry (Baughman, 1980, p. 1361). Outside the library, at civic meetings, club get-togethers and PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) gatherings, the library director can meet members of the community, establish what their needs are, and determine if the library is satisfying these needs. The director can then change services that are not effective in meeting the needs of the community. "The library director's primary role is to be out and about in the community, visiting with people, knowing what is going on, then gathering the materials that will help meet the true needs and interests of the individuals and community agencies" (Torgeson, 1991, p. 158). The library director cannot sit in an office and expect everyone to come to her. Rather, she must be out in the community, promoting the library, collecting feedback, and applying it to the services the library provides.

The packaging and promotion of the library are very important, and the library director must be able to articulate a vision of the library to the public (Carrigan, 1992, p. 342). When promoting a library to the public, the director needs to keep in mind the distinction between the product orientation focus and the selling orientation, and use the former. Product orientation involves "focusing on an organization's basic offering and a belief that the best marketing strategy . . . is to improve this offering's quality" (Andreasen, 1976, p. 106). This approach to marketing keeps the attention on the quality of the product or the service being offered and, because of that, this approach benefits the consumer. Effort is not made to sell something that the consumer may or may not need, but instead the focus is to keep the service at such a high level that it is desirable.

To be successful in the role of determining the needs of the community, the library director must possess community skills. Such skills include effective public speaking, the ability to network and build relationships, and the ability to effectively articulate a vision of the library to the public (Carrigan, 1992, p. 342). These skills are useful in other roles as well, such as representing the library to the community.

3. REPRESENTING THE LIBRARY IN THE COMMUNITY

The library director needs to represent the library and maintain a presence in the community (Carrigan, 1992, p. 340). Like the building itself, the library director symbolizes library services, and she must be visible to make people aware of what the library has to offer. The director should be personally acquainted with as many members of city council as possible, and should be able to take up matters informally, in the spirit of mutual helpfulness (Goldhor, 1989, p. 311). These informal relationships may prove to be invaluable when formal decisions need to be made.

The library director should also be willing and available to address clubs, the PTA, and other civic organizations about the library (Goldhor, 1989, p. 312). This will ensure that the library director is known and her visibility in the community is established. The director must be willing to join civic clubs, such as Rotary or other service organizations, in order to network with a wide variety of people and learn what their needs are and how the library can satisfy them. This outreach is important because the library, like every other civic organization, must compete for city funding.

4. GENERATING FUNDS FOR THE LIBRARY

One of the library director's most important, and newer, roles is to generate funds, both internal and external, for the library. This has become more difficult in recent years. "The competition for public funds in large cities has intensified at the very time that large numbers of public library supporters were abandoning the cities for the suburbs" (Carrigan, 1992, p. 337). Therefore, libraries cannot expect to be simply handed adequate funds from the city. They must be willing to fight for their share of the city's budget as well as raise funds from private sources. By representing the library and knowing the needs and wants of the community, the library director meets the people who distribute funds, and also can tell them for which services their constituents want the money used.

The director must have experience in budgeting and working with the fiscal bureaucracy of a city. This experience relates to the ability to know how to network and make contacts. Directors are "sent into the playing field annually for the game of funding the operations budget," and they must "know the costs of interaction ... and enjoy playing the game" (Howard, 1978, p. 26). Budget strategy entails garnering support to convince government authorities and rank and file citizenry to make the budget a reality. Such a process requires external reciprocal relationships with a multitude of outside entities for any promise of success. (Baughman, 1980, p. 1360). It is during the financial "wheeling and dealing" that the value of good contacts is most important.

In addition to securing public money, the library director must be active in acquiring private donations. The pursuit of private funding is an increasingly important duty as civic dollars decline. Libraries find themselves turning outside the city government for money, and the director is the person most involved in fund raising. Because of the need for generating outside funds, the library director must have experience in fund raising and building constituents. Unlike a university, which can draw on its students and alumni for financial support, a library has no such base readily available. It requires more effort to convince people to contribute to the library. A library board should determine specific fund raising objectives and arrange an evaluation procedure to determine if these goals are being met.

* THE ROLE OF LIBRARY SKILLS

Library skills are less important than management skills. Specific library functions can be delegated, but overall management is the responsibility of the director alone. The library board in St. Louis, when hiring

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a director in 1992, "did not see knowledge of the intricacies of library operational and technical matters to be the principal skill the executive director needed to possess. . . The three qualities emphasized by the board were 1) experience as an administrator, 2) background in libraries or comparable educational or cultural institution, and 3) community skills" (Carrigan, 1992, p. 341).

Although most library skills are not as important as good management skills, the library director should have a thorough understanding of the principles of intellectual freedom, as described by the American Library Association and the particular library. The director will be at the forefront of any challenges to the collection, and must have a clear understanding of what intellectual freedom encompasses and how the library stands on it. A policy should be clear and in place, but if not, the director will need to spearhead a campaign to make the collection policy known and understood.

CONCLUSIONS

Ideally, a library director will have an extensive and successful background in management and also possess a library degree. If forced to choose, a board should select a person with management and non-profit experience, but not necessarily a library degree. This is because many of the roles the library director will be expected to perform focus more on management in general and less on the library itself. Management experience should outweigh the library skills when balancing a candidate's qualifications.

The fact that the best qualified person may exist outside the field of librarianship raises concerns about the content of library education. To better prepare librarians to obtain and succeed in management positions, the focus of library schools needs to be examined. Library schools should coordinate with business schools to offer a M.L.S./M.B.A., similar to the J.D./M.B.A. offered at some schools for law students. Or, less formally, individuals who wish to pursue library management should take a multitude of business classes, especially concerning non-profit institutions. Business classes in addition to library school will better prepare librarians to manage a non-profit business. The library needs to be considered a non-profit, service-oriented business, and the education of librarians should reflect this idea.

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A RESPONSE

JIM NICHOLS

SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE
INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON
jtnichol@indiana.edu

The ultimate question posed by “The Role of the Public Library Director” is: Should the director of a public library have to be a library professional? I will answer “yes” to that after answering the preliminary question which is: How much and what kind of management is really needed in a public library, in an age of technological change, shrinking public funds, and demands for accountability?

The answer to how much, of course, is enough. I raise this issue only to establish one assumption in regard to the size of the public library. That is, if the library is too small to warrant at least one full-time administrator, then we should assume that the library director ought to be a professional librarian, who also has management training and experience. This is no small point since small libraries easily outnumber large libraries. The rest of my comments will assume a public library program large enough to employ several librarians and in which the library director devotes full-time to administration.

What kind of management is needed in a public library in the current climate of change? Old bureaucratic approaches based on command and control are fine for maintaining the *status quo*, but do not readily adapt to change. It has been tempting to look towards the apparent successes in the private sector, but it is not easy to replicate some of the successes, even in their original sector, and it is sometimes difficult to translate management techniques into new accountability structures.

Fortunately, a few models for management of organizations have proven themselves in the private and public sectors. Most of these models are derived from the work of Deming. TQM (total quality management) is such a model and has been applied to libraries. A compatible model that is based on the experiences of European service industries has been promoted by Albrecht.

These models share a handful of features that can transform any service organization. The biggest challenge is to become truly customer or user-centered, instead of technology or tool-centered. This requires, among other things, systematic listening to the users, and evaluations of service based on the users’ experiences. The second challenge is to establish continuous improvement and commitment to quality as a part of the organizational culture. This requires a particular approach to management, calling for vision and leadership from the library director, and empowerment of the whole staff.

We should first of all recognize that quality management is not the stuff of traditional management education and training. Holding an MBA is no guarantee that one can lead a public library staff through the changes that are needed. But even given appropriate background in quality management in the public sector, a public library director who is not a professional librarian will face a substantial barrier to effective management.

The key terms here are leadership, vision, and culture. What ties these together finally are values, or in a public organization, the public service ethic. The appropriate source for leadership, vision, culture, and values in a library organization is the library profession as a social institution. Unless the library director is indoctrinated into the profession, and contributing to and participating in professional organizations, then she will be left out of the loop when it comes to formulating the most basic elements of a public library organizational culture, and be greatly handicapped in providing complete leadership, both in the library organization and in the community.

And so, yes, I would require a public library director to be a professional librarian with appropriate management training and experience. This may mean putting a priority on recruiting those with an MLS and an MPA (Masters in Public Administration). Several public librarians have such credentials. If a library needs a management specialist without any necessary library background, that person should be in a staff or assistant-to-the-director position, and serve in a consulting role for the organization.

What does this mean for the education of public librarians? First of all, the library school experience should include inculcation of the values of public librarianship. Secondly, the one or two management courses that most students can manage to take should focus on those skills that can make one a good team player and leader for quality service (interpersonal relations, conflict management, group dynamics, and user-centered evaluation and monitoring, for example). And finally, the need for additional management training as a part of professional development needs to be clearly communicated to the students and to their potential employers.

A RESPONSE

CHRISTINE MARTIN

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

cmartin@alexia.lis.uiuc.edu

The original Garrou essay points to St. Louis as one of the library boards that apparently agreed that “library skills are less important than management skills” and that the new director needs: 1) experience as an administrator; 2) [a] background in libraries or comparable educational or cultural institution[s]; and 3) community skills.” Most librarians, however, know that the leadership (some would say political) abilities described above have been a part of “library skills” since time immemorial. Any library director who is inclined to “sit in his office and catalog books all day” will enjoy little success in the public sector. Public libraries are by definition political bodies. No library director can survive for long without recognizing and working with the competing groups that determine the funding and other support levels for the library.

The essay concedes that “ideally, the new director would have both a non-profit business background and a library degree.” It then goes on to say that “if the library is forced to choose a candidate with only one of these qualifications, we recommend that the candidate with a business background be selected.” It further suggests that library schools examine their focus and consider offering a degree that combines an MLS with an MBA. Most librarians probably would agree that a library degree combined with leadership skills is the ideal combination of technical and personal skills for someone charged with running a public sector institution. The argument falls apart, however, when we are asked to believe that an MBA or any other academic credential necessarily guarantees the analytical, organizational, and planning skills that are necessary to successfully lead a public sector institution.

No one has a hammerlock on knowledge or experience. After all, what is a manager? We are all managers in the sense that we manage our time, our money [or lack thereof], and our emotions. Indeed, managing time and money (and persuading others that one needs more of both) is in many ways the biggest part of a library director’s job. These skills, like those of motivating employees and understanding customers,

cannot be learned in any B-school or library science program. Rather, they must be learned on the job (or in the community). It is entirely possible that they are simply part of the personality of that type of person we call a leader.

So what does the librarian, the zoologist, or the art historian bring to the job of non-profit administrator? If nothing else, a person with a degree in the field brings with her a knowledge of the lay of the land, and most important, an understanding of the special requirements made of those working under her. In fact, an appreciation of life in the trenches becomes all the more important precisely because the library director, finding budget and personnel matters all engulfing, usually is not engaged in day-to-day library work. After all, how many teachers want to work for a principal who has never taught? How many manufacturing employees respect a foreman who has never been on the factory floor? One cannot isolate herself from the work at hand under the guise of being a manager. Much better to be well-versed in the whys and wherefores of one's field. This, of course, is why for years the traditional route to the top in the business world was a technical degree (frequently in engineering) followed by an MBA. The technical subject matter expertise came first. The analytical, organizational, and political skills that make a leader came second. Certainly libraries and other non-profit organizations deserve the same quality of leadership as the private sector.

More important, however, is the possibility that leadership cannot be taught. It can be developed only through experience. To the extent that the essay recommends looking for relevant leadership experience, most librarians would probably support its conclusion. It is misleading to think, however, that the holders of any particular academic degree have a hammerlock on political or leadership skills. Instead, these skills are developed by meeting with people, making an effort to understand their needs, and offering to work with them in a "spirit of mutual helpfulness." If we cannot find MLS degree holders with these qualities, we are in deep trouble indeed.

AFTERWORD

SHARON M. GARROU

After reading the two responses to my essay, I think that ideologically, we are not that far apart. Neither seem to disagree with my analysis of the roles of the director, and I agree, wholeheartedly, that the director position requires leadership and vision. There are a few comments in the replies, however, that I wish to address.

Firstly, both replies question whether having a business degree makes a person a good manager. That is an assumption that I did not make. Jim Nichols comments that "holding an MBA is no guarantee that one can lead a public library staff through the changes that are needed." Christine Martin states that "the argument falls apart, however, when we are asked to believe that an MBA or any other academic credential necessarily guarantees the analytical, organizational, and planning skills that are necessary to successfully lead a public sector institution." It was not my intention to suggest that a person **must** have an MBA in order to run a library. My statement was that "management experience should outweigh the library skills when balancing a candidate's qualifications" and I suggested a joint MLS-MBA program as a way that library students can learn about management while in school. Clearly, the experience that a person brings to any position outweighs a piece of paper.

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Holding any type of degree does not guarantee that a person will perform the work that needs to be done, and in fact, some people do business, law, or librarian type work well without any formal credentials. However, having a business or public administration degree may be viewed as important in the eyes of the business community in which library directors must interact. Library directors are not truly at the top of the organization; they report to a board, that is often made up of prominent business people in the community. These business people may have business degrees themselves, and may value this in others.

Secondly, the question was raised about the value of "rising through the trenches." The position of library director falls into a spectrum. Above the director is the library board. Comparable to the director, are the directors of museums, police, fire stations, zoos, and other city organizations with whom the library must compete for funding. Below the library director is the library staff. Although an appreciation of "life in the trenches" is certainly desirable, it is more important for a director to be know the "lay of the land" in the business community and to be able to talk to the higher-ups, since it is the board and the city management that control funding. There are other models of managers coming from other areas without "paying their dues" lower down. In Seattle for example, the new superintendent of schools is a retired military officer. In a national example, the Department of Defense is headed by a civilian. A librarian does not have to begin her professional career as a page and a director does not have to be a librarian.

In no way do I wish to imply that successful library directors cannot be librarians. All librarians, in some way, represent the library to their patrons, and all certainly make efforts to know the needs and wants of their community. It is the other two areas, management of a large non-profit organization and fundraising, that are equally important but are not stressed in library education. Experienced people in these areas may be found outside the profession and should be considered as library directors.