



To support and represent trustees in advancing public libraries

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Talking Public Library Governance: The board and library director relationship you really want but are too busy to ask for.

Session Hosts

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Workshop Materials

- Worksheet (Includes Resource List)
- *Library Act*
 - https://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/lc/statreg/96264_01
- “In the Board Room: Staying In the Loop and Out Of the Weeds”
 - <http://www.blueavocado.org/content/in-the-loop>

In brief, why this session came about.

- There is limited research (as compared to opinions) available regarding public library sector board and executive staff roles.
- Most BC public library boards and library directors are proceeding along informed by the *Library Act*, common widely accepted board policies and meeting practices, and the needs of library operations. Almost all trustees and library directors want to feel more successful in their roles and want a stronger working relationship of shared leadership between the board and the library director.
- Even when boards and library directors rate their board governance, operational management, and the board/library director relationship as successful, they want to strengthen their board and library director relationship practices to ensure that their library and community continue to benefit from successful governance and management of the library.
- Often, trustees bring experience in community leadership and board work to their role on the public library board. The library director has public library expertise and supports the



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board in making sense of board work in the public library context. This making sense requires frank trust building conversations; for some boards and library directors, this just clicks and most of us need to be purposeful and put a practice in place for this to happen successfully.

- This workshop was developed in 2017, and will continue to be developed based on shared experiences and feedback, for supporting the board and library director relationships everyone wants, but are too busy to ask for.

Workshop Notes

Part 1. Building common purpose

Background

- The workshop has been informed by the work of John Fulwider, author of *Better Together* (2015). This is not an endorsement of his work over other frameworks or approaches. This is just one approach, among many, for starting a new relationship, jump-starting one that has stalled, or strengthening one that is already great.
- We are using this approach to support the belief that strong leadership partnerships are more fulfilling for both the library director and the board chair and this strong relationship has a positive effect on the whole board and staff, and the impact of the organization on the community. It is the most important relationship for predicting the success of the library.
- For this approach to work, the board chair leads the board and library director leads the staff towards a common view of reaching the library's mission.

Reflect on your own library mission statements and strategic priorities.

- Role of the board in defining and achieving this purpose / strategic priorities.
- Role of the library director
- Role of the board chair
- Role of library director and board chair together.....

Discussion Starter:

1. What is the purpose of a public library? Your public library?
2. What habits or characteristics would you expect to see in a successful library director and board chair relationship for defining and achieving this purpose / strategic priorities?



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Participant Notes

- Board focus on big picture and understanding community (including staff) needs and the library director focus on execution and managing the process.
- Behavior and habits aligned with a governance plan that is strategic
 - Be engaging
 - Have clear roles
 - Know how to move forward with aligned governance and operational work
 - Respecting role of library director and board chair
 - Align meeting agendas with strategic plan
- Highly collaborative outside of the individual library system or branch, such as with Library Federations
- Have a common knowledge base about values and community
- Overall strategic plans to provide direction
 - Plans that move into community gaps
 - Plans to make it happen
 - Plans for fund development / budget planning / financial management
- Board listens to the community and staff for building understanding of priorities -> board sets priorities -> library director and staff operationalize
- The work of the board and the staff is aligned
 - Work to create a collective agenda
- Ability to have difficult conversations
- Open, flexible, curious
- Understanding the situational nature of the board and library director work and building a culture based on respect and flexibility
- Respect for role clarity – particularly for the library director’s role and trusting that the library director will do the job that they were hired for
- Develop and use strong effective policies to fall back on when needed.
- Know when and where to go to for advice
- Position descriptions for board and staff
- Know the core values of public libraries and their purpose (the *Act*, position statements on intellectual freedom, equity, access, privacy)

Part 2. Engaging in ongoing, open communication

Background

Building trust and effective leadership.

- We often see trust as a “nice to have”, but it is a “must have” for a healthy and effective organization.
- It is interesting to observe that infrastructure projects from renovations through to new buildings will often make or break the opportunity for effective shared leadership - a practice of regular ongoing open communication makes the difference.

Three practices that demonstrate engaging in ongoing open communication:

1. *Regular check-ins between library director and chair.*

- Build common language and shared understanding - important for role and responsibility clarification.
- Set the tone for the relationship between the board and library director.
 - Have a stated commitment to leading by example; the board chair/library director relationship sets the tone for other relationships.
- Be open to challenges surfacing before they become problems or risks.
- Best practice is weekly for complete role alignment, but this is rarely achieved or mutually desired.
- Keep tactical stuff (such as discussing metrics or KPIs) short, and have more strategic conversations that start with the chair and library director and then flow down through the board and staff. Focus each week - HR, community engagement, finances/funding and so on.
 - Set a strategic conversation calendar.

2. *A commitment to no surprises*

- No operational surprises demonstrate respect for the board chair.
- For example, give “heads-up” on a news story before they read it in the newspaper.

3. *Ongoing thoughtful reflection on performance.*

- Board responsibility to provide ongoing support and feedback, as well as an annual evaluation of the library director.



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- Board assessment of its own performance; demonstrates that the board has considered the advisement and feedback from the library director.
- Builds a culture of leadership growth, responsibility, and shared vision.

Discussion Starter:

1. What do you find most challenging about board and library director communications?
2. What do you find most gratifying about board and library director communications?

Participant Notes

Challenging:

- No new ideas
- Volume/quantity (too little or too much)
- Keeping a positive atmosphere
- Trustee time constraints
- No response from board
- Having the board understand the situation
- Pre-reading not done
- Absences
- Lack of follow-through; communicate only at meetings
- Not clear or concise
- Sexism, racism and other outdated language
- Operational boundaries
- Not bringing matters to the board due to risk of board getting into operations

Gratifying:

- Informative
- Commitment to the library
- Complements and appreciation
- Enthusiasm
- Supported as a director / sharing common goals
- Timely responses
- Attending council meetings / presenting the budget / communicating and demonstrating board role
- Initiate conversations
- Growing relationship
- Reaching common goal
- Open communication
- Best interest of the community



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- Mindfulness of what is meant to be in-camera and what isn't
- Reflects clarity of roles of governance and operations
- Better use of resources and time when expectations are managed.
- Collective intelligent synergy

In the Loop!

- *In the Board Room: Staying In the Loop And Out Of the Weeds*
- <http://www.blueavocado.org/content/in-the-loop>

Discussion Starter:

1. What do you share and how?
2. What are the qualities that support open communication between the board and the library director?

Participant Notes

What:

- Informational – librarian's report
 - Library events
 - Problems
 - Programs
 - Financials
 - FYIs
- Background or contextual information for understanding the “why” of operations and for making decisions.
- Anything that impacts the reputation of the library.
- Financial reports
- Annual reports (stats and KPIs / outputs and outcomes)
- Committee reports with a focus on what is of strategic importance or is directly related to the board's strategic plan.
- Incidental information such as educational/professional development opportunities
- Information needed for decision making in regards to policy changes or budgets
- Staff recruitment and changes
- Monitoring information (BCLTA, Library Federation, financials, librarians' report, strategic plan progress)

How:

- No surprises! Send communications as urgent/situational issues evolve



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- Library Director provides “heads-up” to chair and the chair provides insight and leadership for presenting to the whole board.
- Verbal Q&A
- Requests for information are made at board meetings or through the chair to the chief librarian.
- Chair and library director meet 1 hour per month to discuss the board and library
- Email reports before the meeting
- Put operational reports (branches, programs, collection statistics) into Consent Agenda
- Library Director to include recommendations, reference to relevant policies in reports
- Importance of documenting and follow-up on communications – public accountability

Qualities of open communication:

- Both the board chair and the library director ask what needs to be shared and how.
- Great ideas and differing views are part of the communication process
- Timely, but not necessarily immediate
- Being on the same page / strategic plan and core public library values
- Having policy that addresses and supports healthy open communication

Challenges to open communication:

- Unclear expectations or lack of guidelines
- Non-responsive email communication
- No feedback loops
- Lack of time
- Board members directly telling staff what to do
- Board members by-passing the chair
- Sarcasm
- Unscheduled communications – particularly board members or chair dropping in on the library director (may be construed as a surprise spot-check)

Part 3. Respecting roles and working styles

Background

Expectations are different from job descriptions. Expectations are about:

- Treating each other as co-leaders and as professionals.
- How the library director leads and supports staff.
- How the chair leads and supports the board.



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- When the expectations are understood, aligned, and agreed on, there is improved clarity of roles, the shared direction, and the goals for the library.

Let's talk about expectations.

Expectations such as:

- I expect that we will debrief after the board meeting and that we will share our reactions and comments and make corrections for the next board meeting.

Discussion Starter:

1. What are other expectations?

Participant Notes

- The library director has an active role in board work – supportive, background information, secretary, shared leadership.
- Library director provides leadership for the board with advisement, accurate reporting, board orientation and development.
- Keeping the board in the loop with the information necessary for governance, oversight, and strategic planning.
- Board chair responsibility to ensure that there is a strong functioning board through recruitment and succession planning, board meeting process, and healthy respectful working relationship with library director)
- The board chair, chairs.
- Substantive discussion take place at board meetings.
- Keep the board engaged.

Roles and Responsibilities

Discussion Starter:

1. Discuss the roles and responsibilities of the board and of the library director in regards to the following:
 - a. Decision making
 - b. Strategic planning
 - c. Policy
 - d. Board working relationships and operations
2. What do we mean by role clarity?
3. What are the choices made regarding roles and responsibilities?
4. Explore differing opinions and reasons for differing practices.



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5. What are some of the best/wise/common practices for establishing and respecting roles and responsibilities?

Participant Notes

Roles and responsibilities of the board:

- Read board package and be prepared for the meeting.
- Meet board commitments, accountability, and fiduciary responsibility
- Advocacy
- Fiscal oversight
- Participate in gathering community feedback
- Ensure library is aligned with municipal vision / needs (OCP and other reports/actions)
- Provide community perspective and stakeholder (such as local government) perspectives
- Meet with key stakeholders at an appropriate governance level
- Evaluate information provided by director
- Be informed and oversee HR policies, legislative framework, and approve Collective Agreement
- Attend meetings and be prepared
- Chair presides at meetings
- Review information before the meeting; ask questions, analyze information before making a decision.
- Set high level strategic directions
- Be familiar with policies
- Review policies, regularly
- Set foundational policies such as Codes of Conduct and Core Values
- Evaluate outcomes
- Ask critical questions
- Be accountable and ensure that library is financially, morally and legally accountable
- Advise
- Hire, evaluate and support the library director. Do what it takes to make them a better and successful library director.
- Act as passionate ambassadors

Roles and responsibilities of the library director:

- Report to the board
- Advises and makes recommendations on policy
- Advises and makes recommendations on budget and fiscal oversight
- Participate in community engagement (surveys, interviews, etc.)



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- Create and maintain internal and external meaningful relationships and partnerships via communications and actions.
- Community liaison - Is articulate and can speak passionately and with knowledge about the library and the community
- Implementation of plan
- Participate in strategic planning session
- Aid in setting high level strategic direction
- Bring forward operational insight from staff
- Fosters and oversees relationships between staff and board
- Provide informational background (costs, stats, budget, financials, legislation, correspondence)
- Operational policies or procedures
- Manage the process for arriving at outcomes
- Measure outputs and outcomes
- Develops operational procedures and policies
- Manages budget, services, operations, infrastructure, staff (hire, lead, supervise, evaluate), collections (the day to day general operations).
- Create and support a respectful and supportive work environment and welcoming library.
- Engage staff!
- Monitors sector trends and changes; inform board of comparable libraries, strategies and priorities
- Identifies potential risks and provides mitigation options.
- Supports board orientation and development

Characteristics of successful trustees/boards and library directors

Discussion Starters:

1. What would be the key characteristics you would look for in an effective board member?
2. What would be the key characteristics you would look for in an effective library director?

Participant Notes

Effective characteristics of an effective board member

- Knows expectations regarding commitment and public library governance
- Diversity that reflects the community, including youth
- Does not manage the operations of the library
- Openness to learning



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- Belief in community
- Willing to stand-up and advocate for the library
- The chair delegates
- Knows the library!
- Strategic thinking
- Critically questions
- Trust and respect
- Stick to plans
- Set aside time for future strategies (funding, policies, First Nation relationships ...)

Effective characteristics of an effective library director

- Community-minded
- Many different hats / skills
- People person
- Strong principles