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**Law librarians and their governing bodies—**  
**Identifying strategies for a successful working relationship**

**The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board"**

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The following is an outline of a longer presentation, a quick summary of which will be given at the program before we move into the question and answer phase. The overheads used are essentially in the same order as this outline.

1. Introduction

a. Presumptions

As this is an advanced seminar, I shall expect that you are fairly well versed in the usual business that comes before a board of trustees and your role in that, from a legal point of view. If you are just beginning or feel you have some holes in your knowledge, then I advise you to read the *Sourcebook on Law Library Governing Boards and Committees* (AALL Pub. # 45, 1994).

The main point behind my talk is to get rid of the clutter and get down to business. Board members do not know how to run a library. What board members have is a perspective you cannot get, that of the outside observer judging the library's services from customer viewpoint and judging the library's costs from a taxpayer or funder position.

b. Purpose for a Board

The duties of a board are usually put in four categories:

- i. Hiring the library director;
- ii. Planning for the future;
- iii. Monitoring and evaluating library finances and services; and
- iv. Being an advocate for the library.

Of those, number one is centrally important, but, given that I am talking to librarians, I will spend no time on that. Of the other three, some board members tend to concentrate on monitoring and evaluating, and it is your duty to see to it that they give the others equal importance. Frankly, I would give the other two greater importance, for, in my mind, the real purpose for a board of trustees is to give you insight into the political viability of your ideas and to help nurture your ideas into politically practical and do-able projects. (If one of them is an idea person, then that goes for his ideas as well.)

So the trick is to allow the Board time to get to the more important items by making monitoring and evaluating easy and complete with minimal participation from the board.

c. Duties

Here is a simple list of common duties of working with a board:

- i. Seeing that appointments are made to the board
- ii. Hosting meetings of the boards or committees
- iii. Keeping track of bylaws and necessary papers
- iv. Preparing agendas
- v. Preparing reports
- vi. Presenting fiscal matters, including a budget

## The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.2.

- vii. Letting board members know the news
- viii. Letting them know the problems
- ix. Letting them know the successes
- x. Helping them to do overall planning
- xi. Separating the big issues from the small ones and keeping them focused on the big issues:
  - (1) Building issues
  - (2) Staffing issues
  - (3) Financial issues
  - (4) Collection and information resource issues
- xii. Getting them to come to decisions as a board

### 2. The Set Up

- a. Now that the preliminary is out of the way, here's what you came to hear:
  - i. How do you get a board to concentrate on the important items and stop meddling?
  - ii. How do you get the board to do some real good?
  - iii. When can you actually look forward to getting some real help from the board, rather than loathing the work of preparing for and enduring the next meeting?
- b. Here is what I plan to show:
  - i. How to eliminate the clutter. Don't waste your board members' valuable time.
  - ii. How to streamline their work.
  - iii. How to employ certain techniques that can aid in avoiding some of the pitfalls of working with a board.
  - iv. How I come up with big ideas that provide my board with meaningful discussion items.

The examples I use may not fit your circumstances directly, or you may have to work over a long period of time to introduce them to your board. But they all are ones that were recommended by other noted authorities besides myself, and I employ nearly all of them myself with good success.

### 3. Create by-laws for the Board.

- a. Get term limits for board members.
- b. Use a consent agenda for Board meetings.
- c. Establish at least these three committees:
  - i. Budget,
  - ii. Personnel, and
  - iii. Facilities/Long Range Planning.
- d. Plan to meet regularly.

## The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.3.

- i. Experience shows that monthly meetings, although tough on directors, are best for keeping board members continually informed. A one-hour meeting may be adequate if the points for keeping meetings short are followed.
    - ii. If you use only bi-monthly or quarterly meetings, then send out monthly information packets.
4. Get good board members.
  - a. When notifying the appointing agencies of vacancies on your board, always include a good description of the workload of a trustee. See to it that any potential appointee understand the time commitment and the nature of the workload.
  - b. Put term limits in the bylaws.
  - c. Do an orientation for each new trustee. I prefer doing them individually, so I can get to know the person. Each new trustee gets a booklet with bylaws, a history of the library (and in our case, the affiliated foundation), a list of the role for trustees, and a copy of the *Council of California County Law Librarians Trustees Manual*. Each gets a tour of our Main Library and some discussion of the current major agenda topics.
  - d. Keep the appointing agencies routinely informed on the Library's work, through annual reports, newsletters, meetings with the heads, etc.
  - e. *Caveat*: It is generally unwise for a library director to express a preference for the appointment of one person over another because your candidate may lose. When asked, you can express a preference for candidates who either are library users or are in a position to be a representative of a class of users, such as a bar association president. Candidates who express an interest in serving on a library board, but who otherwise have had no previous nexus with the library, may have a hidden self-aggrandizing purpose for serving. Sometimes that purpose is to find fault with the library or the director. Sometimes these types can be turned into good trustees when given something good to do in lieu of finding fault. Fortunately, these types are more common to general public library boards than to law library boards.
5. Take charge of things so that your board does not have to.
  - a. Create a personnel manual, defining each position in the library according to a classification scheme, defining annual evaluations, merit increases, promotions, transfers, etc., all with the library director as final authority. Get the Board to approve it.
  - b. Make the board agree to an annual audit that is meaningful. We hire an outside CPA firm, rather than depend on the County Auditor.
  - c. Remove all specific purchase decisions from the Board unless there is a policy implication. It is more important to ask the Board specifically to approve hiring a security guard than to ask the Board to approve migrating to a new online system

## **The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.4.**

- because the potential for public relations problems is greater. If you have to have a check signer, create a treasurer position on the board, and have him sign checks away from board meetings. (Take checks to him.)
- d. Continually create new bylaws or financial resolutions giving you ever greater spending powers.
  - e. Create a grievance procedure, with the library director as the usual final authority, but with an appeal to a committee of the Board. Get the Board to approve it.
6. Keep meetings short and to the point.
- a. Always distribute all materials, as much as possible, well in advance of the meeting.
  - b. Use a consent agenda.
  - c. Urge the president to start all meetings on time, and confirm who will be attending by calling their offices that morning.
  - d. When preparing board meeting agendas, prepare a separate page for each agenda item, upon which you place:
    - i. the requested action,
    - ii. a summary discussion,
    - iii. the library director's recommendation (and the recommendation of any board member or committee),
    - iv. and the fiscal impact.
  - e. Follow the page with any exhibits or longer reports.
  - f. Include "information only" items on the agenda which give the board needed background but do not require action. These could be preliminary information for items you will later bring up for decision, or could be follow up to items previously decided.
  - g. Include a summary report with each agenda that gives late breaking news about the library, with features on what is going on that's good, new hires, etc., and also local and national news that affects the library somehow. I also include here short articles on issues that I am thinking about, which familiarizes the board with the lines of general thought I include in later items I bring to them.
  - h. Use a committee system to handle the more complicated items. Three board members will give you as much good feedback as seven. Committee members, knowing they are responsible for making a recommendation, will be more willing to delve deeply, read their materials more closely, and spend more time at a separate committee meeting on an individual item:
    - i. Bring your annual budget to the Budget Committee, for examination and approval before going before the whole Board. Bring any mid-year adjustments to the Budget Committee as well. Remember that mid-year adjustments will always get more scrutiny than items included in the annual budget, so restrict such events to those absolutely necessary. A good year is no mid-year changes; a common year is one or two.

## The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.5.

- ii. Update your Personnel Manual in subsequent years by routing changes through the Board's Personnel committee. The Personnel Committee should not deal with individual salaries or personnel matters, except perhaps the director's, but with general policy.
7. Ethical points to remember
- a. Be absolutely ethical. Also, work very hard at appearing to be ethical as well. (Make it a point to pay for every photocopy you make for personal use.) Make this a part of your being, so that you will do this even in the face of pressure from a board member or close friend.
  - b. Always keep all board members as informed as possible, in writing.
    - i. Often, board members get buyer's remorse, especially if they do not remember exactly what is happening.
  - c. Never play favorites.
  - d. Never speak ill of a board member to other board members or staff. You may address a person's preferences or even their eccentricities, but always be kind in doing so.
    - i. If you simply must vent about someone, do so only to your spouse or a professional colleague outside your library who is your confidante. Bad thoughts have a way of returning to people you wish did not hear them.
    - ii. Never comment about a trustee in this manner by e-mail or written document.
  - e. Always allow a board member's position to be heard.
  - f. Include staff reports to your agenda items. Bring staff to meetings when appropriate. Praise staff for good work in front of your board. (I bring senior staff to all my board meetings, but they sit apart from the board and enter the discussion only when I turn to them.)
  - g. Board-staff interaction, except through the director, should not be allowed, even if you have to face up to a board member in order to demand it. You cannot maintain discipline if a staff member has a special line to a particular board member. Also, such a relationship would cause the board member to act individually, rather than as a part of the board, giving that member too much influence.
    - i. Caveat: A board member's request for reference service on his own matter (as distinct from a board matter) may be handed over to a reference librarian, but it is a good idea to check on the adequacy of the response.
  - h. Learn to accept criticism graciously, refuse to be defensive. Develop a core feeling (belief in your heart) that you are always more worthy than others imply with their criticism, and also develop a feeling that others are generally more worthy than you believe them to be.
8. Miscellaneous Matters

## The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.6.

- a. If you are a governmental agency, create a separate organization for fund raising and tangential library activities, such as a foundation or friends group. By their very nature, governmental organizations cannot perform some of the chores necessary for a good library very easily, such as good public relations events (dinners, lectures), soliciting funds, making purchases outside of governmental purchasing regulations, and so on.
- b. Have your board create a mechanism for evaluating the library director annually. It is my experience that I prefer not to use the types of forms suggested by the American Library Association. Rather, I ask my board to approve a list of objectives for me at the beginning of the year. Then at the end of the year, I report my progress on each of those objectives and any added during the year, and I report what I did with regard to each of the items listed in my job description. (Much of that is the same from year, but surprisingly more changes than you'd think.) This long document is then given to each board member, and the board holds an executive session at a regular meeting to discuss the evaluation. The board then appoints one of its members to write an opinion, usually a two-page memo praising me for my accomplishments and noting a thing or two they'd like to see me do better on. The memo then is passed around for everyone's approval and voted on at a subsequent meeting, sort of like writing an appellate opinion. The memo includes the merit increase. (Usually, the author of the memo asks for my input regarding compensation, e.g., salaries of my peers at similar institutions, etc.)

I have found that this method helps to inform board members of my work and increases their understanding of how the Library works. I always offer this material to new board members so they can "catch up" on what has happened at the library over the last year, with a particular personal touch on just what I do.

I believe what they learn is that I am not perfect, but I am very good at my job, and I do a lot of things they don't see reflected on the board agenda.

- c. Be boastful of the good things that the library does and that the staff does, and don't be shy about your own accomplishments
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9. Getting to the Big Items
    - a. Spend time thinking on bigger issues at every meeting.
    - b. Always overestimate your board members' intelligence. Those that don't understand a point will get help from those that do, and those that do the explaining will often thereby become committed to the idea.
      - i. Never condescend to a board member.
    - c. Always underestimate your board members' knowledge of jargon terms.
      - i. If you cannot explain an issue in common terminology, you may not understand it thoroughly enough yourself.
      - ii. Remember that every decision must be politically viable, in addition to being the industry standard, which is the technological equivalent to "Keeping up with the Jones."

## The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.7.

- d. Think on a grand scale, and expect your board to do so, too.
  - e. Your board will give you advice, but it is your job to see that they give you advice on things for which their advice is useful, rather than advice on things that you know more about than they do.
  - f. Some board members will have hot button issues and the ego or self-aggrandizing attitude to push those issues strongly. Learn to channel such issues constructively so that they fit into the library's overall mission. Take advantage of the talent you have when you've got it. By going along, you will get a board member willing to put out more, rather than one who obstructs your other moves. (You can get back to your own agenda later.)
10. Organizing the Big Issues
- a. Get a mission statement. The director should write, and have the board pass it.
  - b. If the board is not already studying big issues regularly, then suggest strategic planning.
    - i. Be prepared to go the full route, including getting input from library users.
    - ii. If the board is lethargic, then take it in little steps, perhaps taking up one topic for discussion each month.
  - c. Another pattern is to have the board create annual objectives for itself.
  - d. Routinely report on neat things you find out about other libraries.
  - e. Be sure your Facilities/Long Range Planning Committee meets at least a couple times during the year.
    - i. At my library, we have one committee now that covers facilities, information technology, and trends. It involves not only long-range planning, but methods of funding. Other libraries could have as many as three committees on this topic: Long-Range, Buildings, and Funding/Legislation. Just be sure they coordinate their thinking.
11. Developing the Vision
- a. The skills you know you need:
    - i. Organizing the work of the board.
    - ii. Communicating with board members regularly.
    - iii. Taking the initiative to prepare reports and bring solutions before problems get too large.
  - b. The real skills you need:
    - i. Think ahead. One cannot be a fortune teller, but you do need to develop you intuitive sense of where things generally are going, where you want the library to be, and what things you can do either to foster that goal or remove obstacles.
    - ii. Be open minded. View things form other perspectives. Try things you have not done before.
    - iii. Learn to speak publicly, such as speaking before groups, testifying before a county board of supervisors or city council, and visiting legislators.

**The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.8.**

- iv. Learn to listen, both to board members and staff, and even to library users, including the eccentric ones.
- c. The things you need to do:
  - i. Spend time thinking on bigger issues.
  - ii. Observe what is happening in the world of librarianship. Attend not just the usual meetings, but meetings of other library organizations or other professional groups.
  - iii. Steal ideas from other libraries.
  - iv. Read. I read mostly newsletters, such as LJ Hotline, Library Systems Newsletter, newsletters on employment law, national newspapers. (I read the National Law Journal, very lightly, but closer on the articles on technical development.) I read books on futurism, management ideas, and so on, in some depth. Let all this information sink into your head for later application when you are thinking up solutions.
  - v. Develop friends among your colleagues with whom you can bounce ideas around.
  - vi. Watch others work, especially local political leaders and high level bureaucrats, and see their techniques, their methods for listening to others, and so on. Observe them critically, and note any patterns you see. Most such people tend to use patterns that have been successful in the past, and different leaders will have success at different things. Pick and choose techniques that might work for you.
  - vii. Work irregular hours, spending more time during the crunch times and less when the deadlines are farther away. Your work is seasonal and has peaks and valleys. Also, you must recognize when you are physically able to be more productive and when you are not. If you work the same hours all the time, be they short, regular or long, either you are not doing enough or you are exhibiting workaholic tendencies, working longer, but not smarter. Never complain or boast about your own hours.
  - viii. Organize yourself enough to be reasonably efficient, but no more. Whether your desk is messy or not is not the issue, but whether you keep your projects moving is, and most important, whether you are devoting enough time to thinking out new ideas is.
    - (1) If the mess gets too big, i.e., you can't find that paper when you finally get that call back, then come in on Saturday and create new files and discard those things you know you should but couldn't when you first got them. Use the fact that you couldn't discard them before to determine whether you have a project or new idea coming into fruition or whether you are getting lazy in opening your mail.
    - (2) Of course, if you operate your office that way, you need to clean up on a regular basis. I typically do a light clean up before each board meeting and one or two heavy ones each year.

**The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.9.**

- d. Bring your ideas to fruition.
    - i. My biggest work is thinking with both sides of my brain to come to solutions and plans, not only that are logical, but that are beautiful. My own best ideas typically come to me in a Gestalt, a piecing together of a puzzle down in my subconscious from disparate inductively-realized pieces. This takes time to mull things over. I often work on several projects at once while this is going on.
    - ii. Commit your ideas to paper or computer file, even if only for your use. Keep a professional journal, if so inclined. Often, these written ideas provide the core for later policy memos or positions statements.
    - iii. Continue to refine your ideas through discussion with others. Let others, especially staff, add things of their own. Don't claim exclusive ownership of ideas. They belong to the library.
12. Sharing the Vision
- a. Present your positions to the board or relevant board committee.
  - b. Be prepared to alter the vision as you receive input from board members.
    - i. Sometimes they will improve it.
    - ii. Sometimes they will add things that will lessen the value of the vision, but make it more politically viable.
    - iii. Sometimes they will change it for the worse, and you will just have to accept it in that form. Remember that half is better than none, and it gives you an opportunity to present a later board with a better idea as if it were new.
  - c. When you are not decided between two or more choices, present the board or committee with options. My board has often helped me see more clearly between the choices.
  - d. When you prefer one course, but you know a board member prefers another, present them both. Give your reasons for your preferences and state as best you can the reasons for the alternate viewpoint.
    - i. You will win more often than you would think, as most board members will respect your view as the more professional of the two, and you have removed the fight for ego by your even-handed presentation.
    - ii. If you lose, be gracious about it. That will be remembered, and the board member who opposed you on this matter may well support you on the next.
13. Recognize the good work of board members
- a. Present them with plaques for service when their terms are over.
    - i. Plaques are nice in that they may hang them in their offices and thereby encourage others to think about helping the library or at least discuss the library.
    - ii. If possible, present them at some annual ceremony, dinner, or lecture.

**The Librarian's Role: Set Them Up To Do Good, or "Don't Bore Your Board," p.10.**

- b. Write personal letters to them upon the conclusion of their service.
- c. Bring in some personal touch at regular intervals.
  - i. I provide cookies at board meetings, paid from my own pocket.
  - ii. Other librarians display pictures of trustees in their libraries, or post articles about them.

14. Bibliography

These are books that have been particularly helpful to me in organizing my thoughts for this speech.

- a. Paul John Cirino, *The Business of Running a Library* (McFarland 1991). He presents a rather skeptical view on a library director's work. I don't subscribe to his pessimism, but he makes a number of important points.
- b. Richard Farson, *Management of the Absurd* (1994?). The author has a technique of taking myths about management and setting them on their head. This entertaining book is useful in helping keep our heads straight.
- c. Chuck Elliot ("The Board Doctor"), *Board Member Manual* (Aspen, reprinted each year). This manual is supposed to be used to introduce board members to their responsibilities. While not about library boards per se, it is more specific about board-director relationships on a public service board.
- d. Gordon S. Wade, *Working with Library Boards* (Neal-Schuman 1991). A good general introduction.