Boardsmanship: Or, Who Does What?

When hired as the library’s director, you became an employee of the library’s board of trustees. Most of the time, working with your board will be easy, because you have a common interest and mission: to provide your community with the best possible library service. Good board members will be your best allies in providing superior library service. They will bring ideas, encouragement, and enthusiasm to the library. A director who has a hard-working, knowledgeable board will find them invaluable. Below is a general guide to the relationship between the library board and library director.

The key elements to working with your board are respect, communication, and tact. As a new director, recognize the history of the library and the library board. The board is accustomed to doing things in certain ways. Unless they have experienced serious problems, board members are not likely to be interested in tampering with what they believe to be a formula for success. They are not likely to change things unless you can give them good reasons for doing so. Even then, it may take some time for them to develop trust in your judgment.

During your first year as director, you will want to spend time in building a culture of trust in your board rather than in problem-solving with them. Get to know each board member, by finding out how he/she perceives the library’s importance to the community and how he/she visualizes the future of libraries.

Does this mean you should not bring up problems? No, however it does mean you should choose your battles. For example, if you know the board is doing something illegal, you will need to bring this to their attention. On the other hand, you may not want to bring up issues which are only mildly irritating to you.

It is vitally important to communicate as much information as possible to your board members. If you see a potential difficulty on the horizon, make sure the board is aware of it, even if you are afraid it may reflect badly on you. No one likes to be blindsided by a major problem everyone else saw coming. At the same time, do not dwell on the negative. From day one as director, develop the habit of informing the board of the library’s successes whenever possible.

Role of the Board vs. Role of the Library Director

In theory, the library board’s function is to set policy for the library, while the library director’s role is to see that these policies are carried out. In reality, the line between these two functions may not always be clear.
**Boardsmanship: Or, Who Does What?**

While it is true the library board is charged with setting policy, you, as director, will know more about the day-to-day operations of the library. Board members sometimes have ideas which simply are not workable or will end up harming the library. As the director, it is your duty to inform the board of what you expect the practical consequences of their decisions will be. However, once the decision is made, it is then your responsibility to carry it out to the best of your ability, even if you do not agree with it.

Another potential problem is when a renegade board member interferes with the administration of the library. The trustee may come in and tell you to make changes, interfere with the work of your staff, or go out into the community and misrepresent the library’s position on various issues. In these cases, it is important for you to remember, from a legal standpoint, individual board members have no authority over the library. It is only when the board acts as a group at an official meeting that library policy is made.

It is all well and good to know an individual board member lacks the authority to interfere with the administration of the library, but she or he still represents one-fifth of your supervisor. If this trustee has been on the board for a long time or is an officer of the board, he or she may even have a disproportionate amount of influence with the board. What to do in a case like this?

- First, remember to keep your cool. Treat the request with respect and tact.
- Second, tell the board member you do not feel comfortable making the change until the full board has acted on it. Tell the board member you will ask the board chair to put the issue on the agenda for the next board meeting or even call a special meeting, if needed.
- Third, look for an alternative you can use without board approval to solve the problem between the time the problem arises and the next board meeting. Make sure the alternative you choose conforms to current, board-approved library policy.

What should you do if the board makes a decision you do not agree with? As the board’s employee, except in those cases where a decision forces you to do something illegal or unethical, it is your responsibility to carry out the decision as best you can. Try to make it work, and most importantly, do not express your negative opinion to the public or to other members of the staff. No one likes to be second guessed, and to do so is only asking for trouble. If the decision creates problems for the library, document these and bring them to the full board. And remember: If the board’s decision turns out to be a good one, be gracious and remember to compliment the board.
**Boardsmanship: Or, Who Does What?**

**Recruitment and Orientation of New Trustees**

Although trustees are either appointed by the mayor and city council (city libraries) or elected (district libraries), most trustees seek the office because they are encouraged to do so by other board members. As a library director, you can help your board by suggesting potential trustees from people who use the library and have shown an interest in it.

Once new trustees have taken a seat on the board, it is very useful if the other board members and you provide an orientation to the library. Such an orientation may include a tour and a discussion of some of the issues that are currently affecting the library. You should also make sure the new trustees have received a copy of the *Trustee Manual*, published by the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL), as well as copies of (or online access to) important local documents, such as the board's bylaws, policy statements, and minutes. Your ICfL area field consultant is available to provide a Trustee Update session for your trustees [and city council liaison] at no charge. This session covers library law, roles and responsibilities, open meeting law, policy writing, library advocacy, and intellectual freedom issues.

By working with trustees while they are new on the board, you can build the kind of positive relationship that will most benefit your library and, by extension, your community.

**Trustee’s Roles and Responsibilities**

**Idaho Library Laws**