



# Surviving Your First Year As Library Director

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**W**ell, congratulations! You have just landed your first job as a public library director! Take a few minutes to be proud of yourself, pat yourself on the back, and generally bask in the adulation due you on such a spectacular achievement.

Now, be afraid.

Be very afraid.

Panic should be seeping into your bones.

Try to stop hyperventilating. Come out from under your desk.

It will all be okay. You just need to know a few key points and you will breeze through your first year.

It may even become an enjoyable experience! This could be the most fun, most rewarding, and most terrifying job you will ever have. Relax! Enjoy!

You can never know absolutely everything you will really need to know, but focusing on a few basic ideas will help your first year go more smoothly.

## Boards

Okay, this is a biggie. With luck, you will have the chance to speak with the former director and will be filled in on the important things to know about the board members. Further, everyone on your board will be an enthusiastic library supporter (or at least a library user) and positive about making progress toward the future. In addition, they are well trained and desire to know ever more information about their roles and how best to carry out their duties.

It's nice to hope, but just in case these things do not turn out to be true in your library, it is also nice to have a backup plan.

Often boards, especially in smaller libraries, are made up of good-hearted people who are fuzzy, at best, about what is expected of them. They either ignore you (possibly a blessing) or try to manage every last little detail of the library.

But they mean well. Hold onto this idea when things get difficult.

Horror stories abound about boards; I have more than my fair share of them. But it does not always have to be difficult to work with a library board. You want to establish a good rela-

tionship with your board as a group. Show them you are a professional and justify the confidence they have shown in you by hiring you.

Give information freely. Have a folder prepared for each member at meetings, with a few left over for any guests who may attend (this rarely happens, but be prepared). Put in any handout you have—agenda, director's report, special information, et cetera. I like to give out brightly colored folders (different color each month), so when the trustees take the folder home, before they throw it all into the trash they might just take the time to look at the information.

Have sharp-looking reports for them to read every meeting. People trust information they can hold in their hands. You will always want to give your board a report with all the monthly bills listed, and it would be great if you can also show them the changes to the budget each month. If you do not have anyone to do these for you, QuickBooks or Quicken software programs are pretty easy to use and not terribly expensive. You may also want to give the board a report on circulation (break this down as much as you can or to the extent that they show interest in different areas of the library), and maybe even a door count and a computer-use count. People serving on boards often do not know as much about the library as they could, so do what you can to help them understand what is important!

Respond promptly to any request they make—even if it seems nuts. When they ask things that are actually impossible, gently try to redirect them. But in the end, remember, these people are your bosses and need to be treated as such.

Plan for the meeting as if you were planning a formal social event. Read a few books or articles about it if you are really clueless about how to act (see the sidebar on the next page for a few suggestions). Think, "What would Miss Manners do?"

It is always good to provide snacks and coffee—I like to go with a combination of baked things and a few raw veggies, plus regular and decaf coffee and a few tea bags. This lets them have choices to make—always something to encourage, particularly when the outcome does not matter at all to you or the library. Another easy touch is to give each board member a stack of business cards with their name, title on the board (if any), e-mail address (if any), and the library's address and phone number. You want them to feel like professionals, in the hope that they will act like professionals.

Talk to other directors in your area about what they do with their boards. Do not be at all concerned about not knowing them yet—librarians are almost always incredibly helpful and willing to impart any of their knowledge to anyone who asks. We have all been in trouble at one time or another, and no matter how hard or weird or shameful your board problems may seem, someone will have suggestions on how to handle the problem.

Another good idea to help ward off future problems is to establish individual relationships with the members. You want to build a few allies you can count on when (not *if*) problems crop up. You may never be best buddies, but be sure they all know how wonderful you are and make them want to work with you to solve problems. This is another area where some outside reading may come in handy if you are feeling uncertain about how to campaign for your ideas without being too Machiavellian! (See the sidebar on the following page for some suggested resources.) Remember that a board needs a majority to act; individual members cannot act alone. Not everyone needs to love you or to agree with you on any issue—just a majority!

Boards can be challenging, but, with some work, your board can be a useful part of your library!

## Community Involvement

A pleasant truth you will come to discover is that everybody likes the library! Even people who do not use your resources will be too embarrassed to say so and will at least pretend to be positive about what you are doing. Your enthusiasm is your springboard into community activities, which can benefit both the community and the library. Offer to go to schools and read books or talk at career days. Join the chamber of commerce or the Rotary or Kiwanis. Get your name out there.

Talk with other nonprofits to see what kind of things you can do for each other. In one of my libraries, I worked out an arrangement with a local VA hospital in which we accepted canned food instead of money for library fines. The food was donated to the VA's homeless shelter. After we held our first book sale, using many books donated by a large local company, we donated the remaining books to the VA's library. In return, they worked with us to send out press releases about how great we were, and they also took a lot of books off our hands that we could not sell and did not want to throw away. With this partnership, we were both better able to serve the community.

This type of involvement will allow you to give more to the community—which you presumably care about or you would not be a library director. They will give you good publicity. And, again looking to minimize future problems, making friends around the community will give you people you can draw on when problems arise.

## Grants

This can be your area to shine! Toss aside any silly concerns about asking people for money! Erase any notions you have that others may deserve it more! Revel in your own neediness! If you are in a public library, you need money. Case closed.

Now you are in the proper frame of mind to work on the applications. Particularly for smaller libraries, having extra money, materials, equipment, or programs can make an enormous difference in how well you are able to serve your patrons and the community.

You may not know anything about grants. You may have never even seen a grant application. Fear not! I had zero experience with grants on my first director's job and still managed to bring in more than a quarter of my library's annual budget in grant funds in my first year!

Obviously, the first thing to do is to find the applications. You can start by asking other directors (notice this recurring theme). They can point you to a few grant offerings, and those folks can point you to other grants and other people handing out money. Network! There are a lot of publications listing available grants (see the sidebar on the next page for some suggestions). You can also cruise the Internet for discussion lists and Web sites dealing with grant seeking. You will find a lot of opportunities through these methods. There is money to be had—you just have to work for it.

Many grant applications crop up quickly, so it is a good idea to keep an "idea file." When you and your staff have great ideas for things you need or want, write them down and collect

## Suggested Resources for Planning Meetings

Zimmerman, Doris P., and Henry M. Robert. *Robert's Rules in Plain English*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

Doyle, Michael, and David Straus. *How to Make Meetings Work*. Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Publ. Group, 1993.

Timm, Paul R. *How to Hold Successful Meetings: 30 Action Tips for Managing Effective Meetings*. Franklin Lakes, N.J.: Career Press, 1997.

Carver, John. *Planning Better Board Meetings: Carver-Guide 5*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Weisman, Carol E. *Build a Better Board in 30 Days: A Practical Guide for Busy Trustees*. Vol. 1. St. Louis, Mo.: F. E. Robbins and Sons, 1998.

Flickinger, Ted, Executive Director, Illinois Association of Park Districts. "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Board Meetings." [www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ip960706.html](http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ip960706.html).

Andre, Jolie, President, Polished Professionals. "Are You Promoting Effective Meetings?" [www.salesvantage.com/news/etiquette/effective\\_meetings.shtml](http://www.salesvantage.com/news/etiquette/effective_meetings.shtml).

as much information as you can about what you will need, such as items necessary and prices. This way you can be ready to go when an application finds its way to you.

Do not overlook the obvious tactic of asking local businesses to donate things. Cash is always nice, of course, but many of them can offer other things—office supplies, used books. I received ten computers from a local business that bought new ones and passed the used ones on to us. They were a couple of years old, but still better than what we had, and they dramatically increased our capability to provide good service to the patrons! I also set up an annual donation by a local business of the entire Thomas Register set; they needed the updated material every year, and we were happy to have information a year out of date that was totally free! Businesses probably do not realize they have material we can use, so do not hesitate to ask them!

And do not forget to be thankful to the folks who are passing things out to you. My very best grant story involves a short thank-you note. My library was in a severe budget crunch, which had frozen the entire materials budget. A couple gave us a subscription to a magazine. I was so grateful I sent a short note telling them how much we all appreciated it. A few months later the woman called me. She said she and her husband sent subscriptions to several libraries, and we were the only ones to send a thank you. Then she told me she and her husband manage a small foundation, and could we use some extra money for anything?

After I picked myself up off the floor, I managed to mention that there were one or two things we could use. She sent us a check for \$500, and has sent the library \$500 every year since then!

The lesson to remember about grants is that the more people you talk with, the more opportunities come to you, and the more successful you will be in enhancing your library's ability to serve the public. Your staff, your board, and your community will love you for it!

## Some Suggested Sources for Library Grants

With grants, like so many other things, take your searching in stages. You may want to start small, then work your way up into the larger grants.

- If your library is part of a system, that will probably be your first stop. These folks may well have some great ideas of where to look for grants and may even be offering grant money to their libraries (a small pool of applicants means you have a better chance!)
- Big companies in your area may also offer grant opportunities. Abbott Labs, Target, and Wal-Mart are just a few of the companies offering money for local literacy projects. Even if the national office seems too large to work with, often contacting the local store manager or the local district manager can help you obtain something (a place to meet, donations of goods to the library, etc.). Be flexible in what you need. Some places that cannot give you cash *can* give you other valuable resources. Ask!
- Check your state library's Web site for information on how they distribute the federal grant money they receive. The people who work with the distribution know a lot about grants and can be a great source of assistance.
- Look into grants from your state or local humanities council. Such councils are often on the Web, and they may list several interesting grants for you to explore.
- The Institute for Museum and Library Services has a big grant program going ([www.imls.gov/grants](http://www.imls.gov/grants)). Probably this is not the first place to look for money, unless you are already established or can form good partnerships with a local museum.
- The Grantsmanship Center ([www.tgci.com](http://www.tgci.com)) is a good place to find some basic contact information for federal,

state, and foundation grants applicable to nonprofits (not specifically libraries, but think out of the box!).

- Be thinking of unusual grant opportunities: Paul Newman ([www.newmansown.com/5b1\\_grants.html](http://www.newmansown.com/5b1_grants.html)) provides grants for educational organizations. Consider how to structure your library programs to meet the requirements of these grants—it may be very similar to what you are already doing! The Balance Bar company gives away grants for balancing body and mind ([www.balanceoasis.com/grants/rules.asp](http://www.balanceoasis.com/grants/rules.asp)). Could you team up with a local organization to grab one of these?
- Don't forget to check your own library catalog and the catalog of any university near you. You may be sitting on a treasure trove of resources, and a university library will be very likely to have materials about grants useful to your institution.

Sometimes knowing how to write a grant is more important than knowing where to find one. As you keep talking about grants, more and more opportunities will come to you. But then you need to know what to do. The following Web sites can provide you with some more information.

- Non-profit guides, [www.npguides.org](http://www.npguides.org). A basic site giving information on grant writing for nonprofits.
- The Foundation Center, <http://fdncenter.org>. This site provides a lot of great information for grant seekers, including a short, easy-to-follow course in writing grants.
- The Association of Fundraising Professionals. [www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org). This may be too advanced for a beginner to join, but certainly any information on what to do will be helpful to you. You do not need to be a member to read information from their site.

## Staff

This is the key element to making your library successful. If your staff performs well, everything else will follow. You need to begin team building right away. If you are new to the library, it will be a struggle first just to learn everyone's names, but the results you can accomplish with motivated employees will be worth the effort.

Meet with each member of the staff individually soon after starting your job (managers only at first, if you have a large staff). Bring them in to discuss the responsibilities they have handled, the things they do that they most enjoy, and the things they most hate. Get a feel for where they fit into the organization, both their official roles and their unofficial roles. Close by discussing some of their own goals for the library and for themselves in the library.

A few people will have ideas about things they want to accomplish. They will know there is an underserved area they can take care of or a need they can fill. They will have something they have always wanted to try in the library. They will be eager to assist with planning, and you will observe them encouraging their peers and leading other staff members. Hang on to these people! They are your leaders, and they are worth

their weight in gold. Their job titles do not matter as much as their willingness to be your ambassadors in carrying out your plans. Your best hope for success is to encourage these people and to provide them with the support and training they need to be successful in helping the library move forward.

Maybe the most important thing you can provide for your staff is too often overlooked—training. Stop your groaning—training can be fun! If you have a small staff, it is likely everyone is familiar with each other and every other job. A larger staff can easily disintegrate into an “us vs. them” mentality, with one group never really understanding what other groups do. Basic cross training between departments will help everyone provide better overall customer service. Also, ensuring each department clearly understands the best practices in their department and carries them out is crucial.

Another important benefit of all-over training is that every level of staff feels appreciated. Too often professionals are sent to conferences and given training as the budget allows, but money and time run out before trickling to the lower-level folks. Remember that you depend on pages as well as MLS librarians. Give everyone training and make it meaningful to

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One library board chair stated: "I appreciate that you provided handy written information. . . . [T]he outcome of the workshop was a structured discussion that specifically addressed issues in our community. Thank you and thank CALTAC for providing a valuable service."

Thomas Barrington (trustee, El Centro), now a trainer, was a member of the first library board trained. He reported that the board found the training "very helpful."

A terrific side effect of the program is that CALTAC membership has risen dramatically. Each library board receives membership brochures, a copy of CALTAC's Trustee Tool Kit, and information on what CALTAC can provide trustees, commissioners, and system advisory board members. By increasing membership, CALTAC becomes bigger and more influential in statewide advocacy.

Now that training has been running for three years, we are starting to get requests from formerly trained boards that have had enough turnover to warrant a second training. This is wonderful, and a measure of the program's success!

Travel expenses (such as mileage, airfare, lodging, and meals) for all involved in this program are paid out of the grant. Allowable expenses (and the standards by which they are calculated) are set by the California State Library.

The time, commitment, and talent of the people involved in the board effectiveness training has been given freely. It is due to their dedication that the program has met with such success.

## Conclusion

I have directed six public libraries during my twenty-eight-year career. Two of the libraries are city departments. During my tenure, neither city government was quite sure where the library fit into its organization and allowed the library board to make most of the operating decisions. Two of the libraries are private. The one operated by a women's club meant it was an outlet for civic contribution by one social group, but there was little diversity. The one begun by the city's elite broadened its scope and has had decades-long involvement by some trustees and their families. Two of the libraries are districts with governing boards that are very much aware of their authority and accountability.

I estimate I have worked with, and for, seventy-five trustees in these six libraries. We've had 330 regular board meetings

and a third again as many committee and special meetings. I remember nearly all of these trustees, some better than others. What qualities have I come to appreciate in trustees?

- Familiarity with the library. They and their families used the library years before they became trustees, and they still do.
- Support for the library. Trustees are members of the Friends, help out at fund-raising events, attend library programs, and name the library in their wills. Trustees lobby for the library to local, state, and national legislators. Trustees encourage their business associates and neighbors to do the same.
- Informed presence. Trustees come to meetings having read the board packet. They know the general library policies and basic budget.
- Respect for the library staff. Trustees do not demand special treatment. They regard staff areas as private. They seek fair pay and benefits for all library staff.
- Respect for the library director. Trustees acknowledge the director's expertise and the challenges of the position. The director works with the board, not for it.
- Sense of the trustee's responsibility. Their role is not self-aggrandizement. It is to seek, collaboratively, the best for the library so that the library's mission can be fulfilled.

Having vision for the library, being committed to it, and being informed—I hope that can be said of each of the more than 70,000 trustees who currently serve on library boards across the country! Go, and do good work. ■



The purpose of this column is to offer varied perspectives on subjects of interest to the public library profession. All correspondence should be directed to the contributing editors. Hampton (Skip) Auld is Assistant Director, Chesterfield County Public Library, 9501 Lori Rd., Chesterfield, VA 23832-0297, (804) 748-1767; [auldh@chesterfield.gov](mailto:auldh@chesterfield.gov). Nann Blaine Hilyard is Director, Zion-Benton Public Library, 2400 Gabriel Ave., Zion, IL 60099; [nbhilyard@zblibrary.org](mailto:nbhilyard@zblibrary.org).



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them and people will reward your appreciation with hard work and higher morale.

## Conclusion

Being a library director is the greatest job you may ever have! And your first "directorship" can be the most educational, the most interesting, and the most fun. It will likely also be the most frightening job you ever have (assuming your previous job did not involve being shot at). It is almost certainly the one that gives you the most opportunity to innovate and to create. You may never again have this kind of an opportunity to leave your

mark on a library and a community. This is not to say there are not going to be problems.

Particularly if you are making a lot of changes, even if they are good changes, some people will be threatened by what you are doing. Do not panic. Keep building your network of friends and supporters in your community, your board, and your staff. They will help keep you going while you and your library achieve new heights of greatness! ■

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