

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Who Runs the Library?

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The mission of most public libraries is to support the educational, recreational, and informational needs of the community. Everyone is welcome at the library, from the preschooler checking out his or her first book to the hobbyist looking for a favorite magazine to the middle-aged breadwinner continuing her education by taking a class over the Internet.

Providing a large number of services to meet the needs of a diverse population requires a large supporting cast including trustees, the library director and staff, and sometimes representatives of the municipal government. When all members of the team know their responsibility and carry out their particular tasks, the library can run like a well-oiled machine. When one of the players attempts to take on the job of another, friction may cause a breakdown.

If there is a mantra for governing boards it is: “The board sets policy, the director operates the library with the assistance of staff.” What does this really mean, and what are the differences?

Sometimes the line between policy and operation is very thin and the differences are subtle. Basically, the board of trustees and the library director work as a team, just as the director must construct a team with staff. In order to work successfully, it must be a process of two-way communication, consultation, and trust building.

## Community Involvement

If the trustees and the library director are to fulfill their responsibilities, both must be active in the community. Both must know the community to develop those policies and practices that bring the best possible library services to their community.

The board membership is likely to represent a variety of community connections. These connections can provide avenues to knowing and understanding the community and to advocacy for the library.

Trustees have a responsibility to stay informed—to regularly attend board meetings and to read and understand information presented to them about the library and its operation. They also have a responsibility to actively listen to community residents. It is equally important that they advocate for the library with community residents and with local, state, and federal governmental representatives. In order to do this, trustees will need to answer questions and to explain library policies and practices. They need to work as a team with the library director, because some questions, especially about library practice, are best directed to the library director. The director and staff must also be prepared to explain library policies and actively advocate for the library.

## Developing Policies

There are several levels of decision-making involved in policy-making. There are many times when the board will ask the library director to analyze impacts before it establishes a policy, and there will be times when the director will consult the board before proceeding with a specific course of action.

Often the director will call the board's attention to a need for policy in a specific area and may draft language for the board to consider. In other instances the board may identify a need for a policy and will either ask the director to draft language for board discussion and action or they may jointly develop specific language.

Sometimes the director will make decisions related to library operations and will simply inform the board of her/his actions, or perhaps ask for their consent for a proposed course of action. This latter course of action is probably wise in situations where it is not initially clear whether additional policy decisions will need to be made or where the distinction between practice and policy is not entirely clear. Discussion can usually clarify the issues and decisions can be made, often by consensus. Certain kinds of decisions may be delegated to the director.

## Examples of Director and Board Roles and Responsibilities

Let's elaborate on the respective roles and responsibilities of trustees and director with several examples. Especially in large libraries, some of the tasks or decisions that are identified as the director's will likely be delegated to managerial or supervisory library staff.

### Mission/Roles of the Library in the Community

It is the governing board's responsibility to determine the mission and roles of the library after a planning process that includes a great deal of input from residents of the community, and in coordination with the library director. These fundamental decisions need to be articulated in a mission statement and supported by policy and planning.

Once those fundamental decisions are made, it is the board's responsibility to hire a director who is in agreement with and can support the chosen roles. A more specific example of how this works: Board policy or the library mission states that the library is to be user friendly and a place where people feel welcome. It is the library director's responsibility to make it happen. It will involve setting expectations regarding attitudes of staff towards the library customers, training for staff, and establishing library practices and procedures that make users feel welcome and satisfied with their library experience. These are all responsibilities of the director.

### Budget, Contracts, and Grants

The board approves the library budget, as drawn up and recommended by the director, but it is based on goals set by the board. The budget corresponds to the annual work plan for the director and staff. The board may suggest general policy directions for the budget, but the director in consultation with staff decides what is possible within budget constraints, and how best to meet the full range of needs. The director expends money within approved budget parameters and keeps the board informed. While trustees may review and approve bills/invoices each month, they should not approve individual expenditures. The board should be informed by the director of any major changes needed in the budget and the proposed changes must have board consensus. Trustees should not be involved in adjustments made to budgets as long as those adjustments are within general budget parameters as approved by the board.

Contracts and/or grants should support the library's strategic plan. The board must approve all contracts but the contract or grant specifics will be drawn up and recommended by the director. Trustees must be kept informed of potential contracts or grants, and should provide input regarding the content or parameters of impending contracts or grant documents. Whether to apply for a particular grant or enter into a contract may be a policy matter, and thus the board will make the final decision. There may be instances where the board determines that it is appropriate to delegate to the director the responsibility for signing agreements on behalf of the library.

### Personnel

The board establishes overall personnel policies such as guidelines for salary and benefits, hiring practices, and other personnel actions unless the library is part of a town/city and must follow municipal policy. The director implements personnel policies. Trustees should not become involved unless personnel policy changes are called for.

Unless the library is part of a municipal system that maintains authority to hire the director, the board hires the library director and sets salary and benefits. In this process, the board may seek input from library staff and/or community residents, but the ultimate decision rests with the board. In turn, the director hires library staff and the board is not involved in interviewing or selection. Unless the salary schedule is established by the town/city, the board approves the salary schedule as drawn up and recommended by the director. It is the director's responsibility to decide where a job classification will be placed on that salary schedule.

The board should do an annual performance review of the library director. As a result of the review the board and director should jointly set goals and expectations for the coming year. The annual performance review of the director will be based on how well those goals and expectations have been achieved. The

director should carry out annual performance reviews of library staff, set goals for staff performance, and determine staff training needs. The board approves policies for staff training, attendance at conferences, workshops or classes, travel reimbursement and the like, but they are not involved in staff review.

Disciplinary actions related to library staff are a responsibility of the library director. Although the board sets disciplinary policy as part of overall personnel policy, board members should not become involved in specific disciplinary actions. Complaints made directly to board members must be referred back to the director for action. The director should always consult the library attorney on any disciplinary actions that may reach the point of hearings before a human rights commission or a lawsuit. Trustees must certainly be kept informed and will probably need to approve expenditures for attorney fees.

Disciplinary action or firing of a library director is, of course, a governing board responsibility.

### Collections, Hours, and Services

These are operational procedures that are the responsibility of the library director. The board of trustees sets the goals in its adopted plan and defines strategies for collections, access and services, but it is up to the library director and staff to implement the actions that meet these goals. Board members should never make operational suggestions to the library staff. Additions or changes to collections or services should be discussed with input from the library director at a regular board meeting.

### Community Relations and Publicity

The library should have a public relations and marketing plan that encourages partnerships and cooperative ventures with community organizations. Public relations is a shared responsibility between the board and the staff, however the message must be consistent.

### Conclusion

The library board approves the director's recommendations for services. However, it is up to the *director*, as the hired professional, to create the procedures needed to carry out the policies of the board and ensure that services are provided effectively and efficiently. While the *board* alone can decide how many employees the library should have, it is the *director* who hires and supervises other staff. Except in extreme situations, library trustees should not be discussing library business with employees other than the *director*. The library board may solicit library staff input on the director's performance as part of a formal evaluation process.

Administration of the budget and expenditure of funds is a frequent source of misunderstanding regarding the division of labor between boards and directors. The library board audits and approves all bills/invoices for the expenditures of

the public library, but this shouldn't be interpreted by individual board members to mean they must negotiate the necessity of every purchase with the library director, whether the purchase is an expensive computer system or a two-dollar box of pencils. Fortunately, in most libraries, the director is given reasonable latitude to administer the budget and expend funds according to board guidelines. The library board must review expenditures and keep an eye on the flow of funds, but should trust the judgment of the director when it comes to which materials to purchase or which is the most economical office supply vendor.

### Sources of Additional Information

- Moore, Mary Y. *The Successful Library Trustee Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 2010.
- Reed, Sally Gardner and Jillian Kalonick. *The Complete Library Trustee Handbook*. New York, Neal –Schuman Publishers, Inc. c2010.

## Duties and Responsibilities

<i>Of the Library Board</i>	<i>Of the Library Director</i>
Employ a competent and qualified library director	Act as the technical advisor to the board; recommend needed policies for board action; recommend employment for all personnel and supervise their work
Determine and adopt written policies to govern the operation and program of the library	Carry out the policies of the library as adopted by the board
Determine the purpose of the library and secure adequate funds to carry on the library's program	Suggest and carry out plans for extending library services
Know the program and needs of the library in relation to the community; keep abreast of standards and library trends; cooperate with the library director in planning the library program, and support the library director and staff in carrying it out	Prepare regular reports embodying the library's current progress and future needs; cooperate with the board to plan and carry out the library program.
Establish, support, and participate in a planned public relations program	Maintain an active program of public relations
Assist in the preparation of the annual budget	Prepare an annual budget for the library in consultation with the board and give a current report of expenditures against the budget at each meeting
Know local and state laws; actively support library legislation in the state and nation	Know local and state laws; actively support library legislation in the state and nation
Establish all library policies particularly those dealing with books and material selections, Internet Use Policy, ADA, etc.	Select and order all books and other library materials
Attend all board meetings and see that accurate records are kept on file at the library	Attend all board meetings other than those in which the library director's salary or tenure are under discussion; may serve as secretary to the board
Attend regional, state and national trustee meetings and workshops, and affiliate with the appropriate professional organizations.	Affiliate with the state and national professional organizations and attend professional meetings and workshops
Be aware of the services of the state library	Make use of the services and consultants of the state library
Report regularly to the general public and if advisory board, to the town/city governing board	Report regularly to the library board, to the officials of the local government, and to the general public

Source: Virginia G. Young, *The Library Trustee: A Practical Guide*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. American Library Association, 1995