

# Working with Library Boards Evaluation

## **Developing a Strong Board**

## Strong Vs Weak

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ● Resolute                           | ● Irresolute                                 |
| ● Incorruptible                      | ● Corruptible                                |
| ● Easily defensible                  | ● Vulnerable                                 |
| ● Convincing                         | ● Unconvincing                               |
| ● Effective                          | ● Ineffective                                |
| ● Politically powerful and strategic | ● Lacking in political or strategic strength |

### Question: How would you define a strong board?

What does a strong board do? How do trustees on a strong board act? How does a strong board provide governance for a library?

Can you share some examples?

Definition of strong:

- having a resolute will or morally firm and incorruptible character
- intense in quality; not faint or feeble
- easily defensible; incontestable or formidable
- concentrated; not weak or diluted
- convincing, effective, or cogent

*Let's think about it in terms of opposites. What is a weak board? What do trustees on a weak board do or not do?*

- lacking in resolution or firmness of character
- lacking strength, power, or intensity
- lacking strength in a particular part
- not functioning as well as normal
- lacking in conviction, persuasiveness
- lacking in political or strategic strength

If I had to choose one word to describe a strong and exemplary library board, it would be strategic.

## Strategic

- Knows the job
- Understands context
- Is visionary
- Has a plan
- Makes good decisions

What do we mean when we say that libraries and their boards should be strategic? Lots of people use that word to describe how they act, think, talk and plan, or at least how they wish they did those things. 😊

Strategy was originally a military term from the Greek *strategia*. It meant office of the general, command, generalship. Today we use it to describe and differentiate organizations who are really good at what they do. Simply put, it's a plan of action to achieve a particular goal.

Here's what it means today.

- We understand the environment we're operating in. City or county government, the community, our funding authorities, who we're competing with for funding, for people's time and attention, how we use technology, what happens to books and reading in the age of digital content. The list goes on and on.

- We need to have a vision of the library in the future and understand it will change over time.

- We have to have a plan that gets us there. Vision's meaningless without a plan of action.

- And we need to make good decisions, based on research, data, substantive discussion and not on "I think or I feel".

Strategic libraries need strategic boards since they determine policy, mission, vision and approve the goals and the plans to achieve them.

So what makes a strategic library?

## Is your library strategic?

- Manage risk
- Balance local values with our core values
- Have a vision for the future
- Have effective leadership and management
- Get and grow funding
- Act and are seen as a community asset

What do we mean when we say a library is strategic?

According to Ellen Miller in her book **Library Board Strategic Guide** (Scarecrow Press, 2007), strategic libraries and their boards understand and manage risk effectively, deal with the issues relating to local values and the First Amendment and handling the challenges to library collections and programs, have leadership and management that help achieve the library's vision, are proactive in seeking and increasing financial resources and put the library at the table in community decision-making and development.

## Managing Risk

- Compliance with laws, regulations
- Essential policies
- Insurance
- Disaster plan

It's important to note that becoming strategic is accomplished as a partnership between the director and the board.

The director facilitates trustee education and helps trustees become familiar with the environment the library operates within and the issues involved in key strategic areas. The board sets policy, oversees and seeks resources and advocates for the library. Together, the director and board set the mission and vision for the library that determines the goals it must achieve to serve its community well.

Risk sounds a bit scary, but it shouldn't. Risk may occur in the form of legal, financial and physical damage. Managing risk includes ensuring the library is in compliance with all laws, rules and regulations, having essential policies in place, including those relating to minors, customer conduct, collections management and display and meeting rooms. It means having the appropriate insurance coverage. It means having a disaster plan in place. What do you do if there's a flood, fire or other catastrophe? What is the library's role if the community experiences an emergency?

# Values

- Local values
- Library staff values
- Board values

If you haven't yet faced a challenge on library materials, a display, a program or who uses a meeting room, you will. How people define community values doesn't always mesh with the core values we hold as librarians. Intellectual freedom and access to information come into conflict with individuals' ideas about protecting minor children. It is and always will be a balancing act between protecting minors and upholding legal freedoms of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Libraries and their boards manage this balancing act with clear policies that outline how library materials are selected, how Internet access is managed and delineating the lines of authority between the library and parents.

Knowledge of the community and transparency for both the library and the board is an essential value and practice, especially when the library is challenged. Strategic libraries and their boards have a public process for handling challenges and expressions of concern respectfully, in a timely manner and that is in alignment with library policy and values.

## Vision

- What's your BHAG? (Big Hairy Audacious Goal)

Great libraries and boards spend as much or more time focused on the future as they do on the present. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, describes it as the BHAG, or Big Hairy Audacious Goal. The BHAG envisions an ambitious future that staff and board will work towards together.

That's why we place such importance on a strategic plan with a mission, vision and specific actions we'll take to get there. Very simply, people need to know where they're going to figure out how they'll get there. Once we know what outcomes we're looking for, based on what our community wants and needs from its library, we understand what work we must do, what resources we need and how we explain it and make the case to our community and funding authorities.

## Leadership & Management

- Model the way
- Create a shared vision
- Enable others to act
- Challenge the process
- Encourage the heart

Kouzes & Posner. The Leadership Challenge

Directors and trustees are community leaders and they must behave and act as leaders. It's important to develop a common language and practice of leadership. You may have your own or adopt one that works for your library.

This is how we talk about and practice leadership at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library. These are the leadership practices developed by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner in their seminal work, *The Leadership Challenge* <http://www.leadershipchallenge.com/WileyCDA/>

We understand that if we lead and manage in this way, we will be successful. It is how we transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, individuals into team members, and risks into rewards. It's about creating a library in which people turn challenges into successes.



## Funding

- Know & exercise fiscal authority
- Understand public funding (structure, sources, laws, management)
- Advocate with funding authorities
- Understand and respond to those who oppose library funding
- Pursue other funding

Strategic libraries and their boards understand their value, know the real costs of services, collections and programs and pursue the funding resources that will help achieve their vision and goals.

That means:

- Knowing their own legal authority and exercising that appropriately.
- Understanding how property tax is assessed, the availability of other tax and public monies available to public libraries in Kansas, how it should be managed and expended.
- Advocating for adequate funding with the city council or other funding authorities.
- Standing up for the library's funding needs with individuals or groups that wish to reduce or eliminate funding.
- Facing the reality that there is almost always a gap between needs and resources that require alternate sources of funding like grants, donations and sponsorships.

## Community Asset

- Government
- Education
- Culture and Recreation
- Health and Social Services
- Economic Development
- Service Clubs
- Special Projects or Initiatives

Make sure the library's at the table when community plans and decisions are made.

We must be active participants in our community, representing the library's interests and demonstrating how the library can contribute to these efforts. When board members and the director participate in these activities, whether that's the library director as a member of the city manager's management team, the director or a library trustee serving on the Chamber board or as a volunteer for a nonprofit, it shows the difference the library makes in the community and that we contribute to all of these efforts through our collections, programs, services and our partnerships.

We offer people the opportunity to transform their lives in big and small ways – other community leaders and organizations don't know this unless we tell them and show them and show how the library can contribute to their organizations' efforts.

What do you and your trustees do to put the library at the table in community decision making and show the library's value?

My examples: Rotary and Heartland Visioning Process

## Barriers

- “I thought it was just 2 hours a month.”
- “I have my own agenda.”
- Lack of education
- Lack of leadership
- No strategic plan
- Library director who doesn't present the big ideas, big challenges & big opportunities

So what are the barriers to becoming a strong, effective board?

- There are trustees that have wrong or no expectations when they join the Board. They think being a trustee means sitting listening to staff reports and occasionally asking a question about the budget or something that has already happened.

- Or a trustee seeks to be on the board to further a specific cause or issue of his own. That can be disruptive and divisive and can derail the forward progress of the library.

- Is your board what I call a reporting board? Do trustees spend most of their time listening to reports about things that have already happened?

- If the board chair isn't a good facilitator or isn't willing to address challenges and problems, that will hinder the board's development and ability to act.

- If there's no plan, there's probably no action or decision-making.

- As directors, we have a key role in how our trustees perform individually and as a board. If there are no big issues, challenges or opportunities to discuss, trustees will focus on the small ones. That's when micromanagement rears its ugly and annoying head. And board meetings become boring and unproductive. The end result is our customers suffer because the library isn't focused on the future and striving for excellence in the present

## Overcoming the barriers

- Education
- Strategic conversations
- Strong leadership – the board chair
- Partnership
- Commitment

How do we overcome these barriers?

Trustee education isn't a one shot deal. It must occur consistently and regularly. If we expect our staff, ourselves and our trustees to develop and become seasoned policy and decision-makers, they must have lots of learning opportunities. And they must have opportunities to practice those skills.

With that in mind, traditional strategic planning isn't necessarily the best way to ensure that the library and board are strategic. More and more regular, ongoing strategic conversations are replacing the traditional planning model.

Successful organizations have ongoing strategic conversations that include all stakeholders to:

- Promote greater understanding of current challenges and opportunities
- Facilitate acceptance of the need for change
- Develop new ideas for creating value for customers
- Helps people envision the future

It starts with asking big questions, like "What's next for the library?" and then posing other questions that help people break that big question into manageable pieces to think and talk about, like "What are the top 3 things we should preserve or change about the library? Why?"

Strong boards have strong leadership. That means a chair with who is willing to act as a leader, using the leadership practices you've adopted for your library. It also requires strong facilitation skills.

The board chair and the director are partners in developing a strategic board. As you prepare the board agenda, make sure that part of the meeting is devoted to strategic conversation and education. Strategic boards spend as much time talking about the future as they do the present. And they spend a minimal amount of time talking about the past.

And finally, let's talk about commitment. Commitment is harder to legislate or measure than a job description. But **how** trustees do their jobs is just as important as **what** they do.

Perhaps there should also be a commitment pledge or promise that we ask trustees to make to the library and their colleagues on the Board.

## Trustee Commitment

As a library trustee, I will:

- Observe the trustee code of ethics
- Think and act strategically on the library's behalf
- Develop and work on personal goals to improve my service as a board member.

What if we asked each new trustee to sign a code of ethics and commitment agreement?

It would include a promise to observe all trustee ethics, a commitment to thinking and acting strategically on the library's behalf and list their personal goals to improve their service as a board member.

What do you think?

# Questions?

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Thank you!

