

## Boardsmanship: *Or, Who Does What?*

When you were hired as the library's director, you became an employee of your library's board of trustees. Most of the time, working with your board will be easy, because each of you has a common interest and a common 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 these trustees an invaluable help. 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 that the library and the library board have a history. 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 probably want to spend more time in building a culture of trust in your board rather than in problem solving with them. Try to get to know each board member individually, by finding out how he perceives the library's importance to the community and how she visualizes the future of libraries.

Does this mean that you should not bring up problems? No. It does, however, mean that you should choose your battles. Certainly, if you know that the board is doing something that is illegal, for example, you will need to inform them of that. But you may not want to bring up issues that are only mildly irritating to you.

It is also vitally important to communicate as much information as possible to your board members. If you see a potential difficulty on the horizon, make sure that 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 that 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.

## The Role of the Board vs. the 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.

While it is true that 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 that simply are not workable or that 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 that, 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 that an individual board members lack the authority to interfere with the administration of the library, but each trustee still represents one-fifth of your supervisor. A trustee who has been on the board for a long time or is an officer of the board 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 that you do not feel comfortable making the change until the full board has acted on it. Tell the board member that you will ask the board chair to put the issue on the agenda for the next board meeting or even to call a special meeting if necessary.
- Third, look for some alternative that you can use without board approval to solve the problem between the time the problem arises and the next board meeting. *Make sure that the alternative that you choose conforms to current, board-approved library policy.*

What should you do if the board reaches a decision that you do not agree with? As the board's employee, except in those cases where a decision forces you to do something that is 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.

## 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 among 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 can give them an orientation to the library. Such an orientation can 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 [Idaho Trustee Manual](#), published by the Idaho Commission for Libraries, 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 also available to provide a complimentary Trustee Update session for your trustees [and city council liaison if yours is a city library]. Your Area Field Consultant can answer questions about library law, roles and responsibilities, open meetings law, policy writing, library advocacy, and/or intellectual freedom issues. Alternatively, it is also helpful to cover one topic at a time at your regular board meetings.

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 Roles and Responsibilities

Working as a board of five, the responsibilities of trustees can be divided into four general categories:

### 1. Governance

- a. Ensuring that the board and library's organization follow chapter 26 or 27, title 33, Idaho Code
- b. Building a competent board by
  - i. Recruiting board members who can help move the organization forward by utilizing their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)
  - ii. Providing a planned orientation for new board members
  - iii. Ensuring that the board is representative of the community's current demographic
  - iv. Utilizing the services of your ICfL Area Field Consultant
- c. Determining library policy, including
  - i. Policies to guide the staff in making decisions and exercising initiative while ensuring the rights, responsibilities, and equitable treatment of library users
  - ii. Bylaws for the board's governance
  - iii. Personnel policies—A district library needs its own personnel policies concerning recruiting, hiring, evaluation, benefits, grievances, and termination. A city library will generally follow the city's human resources (HR) policies and procedures.
- d. Ensuring the board's legal and ethical integrity in compliance with the provisions of title 74, Idaho Code: Transparent and Ethical Government
  - i. Chapter 1, title 74—[Public Records Act](#)
  - ii. Chapter 2, title 74—[Open Meetings Law](#)
  - iii. Chapter 3, title 74—[reserved]

- iv. Chapter 4, title 74—[Ethics in Government](#)
- v. Chapter 5, title 74—[Prohibitions Against Contracts With Officers](#)
- vi. Chapter 6, title 74—[Public Integrity in Elections Act](#)
- e. Monitoring and strengthening the library’s programs and services, both outputs and outcomes, to ensure continuous oversight and improvement
- f. Holding effective and efficient board meetings in compliance with [Idaho’s Open Meetings Law](#), chapter 2, title 74, Idaho Code

## **2. Finance**

- a. Budgeting to carry out the library’s strategic plan
- b. Budgeting to support open hours, staffing, and programming
- c. Budgeting to support the library’s collection development and management plan
- d. Protecting assets and providing financial oversight as part of the board’s legal responsibilities

## **3. Personnel / Human Resources**

- a. Hiring, supervising, evaluating, and supporting the library director
- b. Budgeting for continuing education opportunities, both for the library’s staff and for the library’s trustees

## **4. Service and Community Relations**

- a. Ensuring effective strategic planning
- b. Engaging the community
- c. Using their own voices as committed and informed champions for the mission of the library and the greater good of all public libraries

To fulfill their governance role as library board members, it is critical that trustees be aware of their full powers and duties as defined in Idaho Code:

- The powers and duties of the trustees of a city library are discussed primarily in [chapter 26](#), title 33, Idaho Code. Idaho Code sections [33-2702\(6\)](#) and [33-2741](#) also apply to city libraries.
- The powers and duties of the trustees of a district library are discussed primarily in [chapter 27](#), title 33, Idaho Code. Idaho Code section [33-2620](#) also applies to district libraries.