

TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES!

Advice from Directors who have been there, done that!

As a director, I thought the IRS was going to audit me for being a few cents off on the Quarterly 941 Form. After a year or so, I finally called and asked the IRS and was told (with a giggle) as long as you are under/over less than a dollar, they will not send out the troops.

Always have someone call the police as you set out to chase the book thief yourself. (It wasn't till I caught him, did I realize I didn't know what to do with him) Better yet, just let the police handle it!

In a small library, the day you wear a dress and heels, is the day you need to help unload a semi or do some other un-lady like thing.

In regards to wearing the dress and heels ... on the day you decide to wear jeans with the rest of staff on Casual Friday, the town manager stops in with guests from another town who want to see the library. I've decided dress-downs days are not for directors.

It's important to take good care of yourself as well as your staff. Especially true in times of great stress (building projects, automation changes, etc.) Don't overwork.

Try to plan some fun things, like spontaneous ice cream for all staff on a hot day. Treats are good!

Take all of your vacation days!

One of the best things I've done regarding the board is to send out a detailed Monthly Happenings report along with the agenda several days before the meeting. If a lot is happening, I send out a mid-month report. Several board members over the years have said how helpful that is to them. They come to the meetings prepared to make decisions. (I give them all the info I have on upcoming issues ahead of time.) Very important to keep the board well informed. I keep a notebook that I jot down anything the board should know so I don't forget!

Ask others for help, especially directors. Most love to share what they've learned.

In a small library, the day you wear a dress and heels, is the day the toilet overflows and you have to plunge it yourself!

In a small library, I see all the book salespeople. I learned quickly to pare down the people I see to just a handful because you find out after a year or two that many salespeople carry the same books. After 13 years, I only see about 4 or 5 salespeople a year. You just can't meet with EVERY salesperson.

I learned this one almost too late... You need to establish right off the bat who is boss. This is difficult when you are young & new coming into a place where people have worked for 15-20 years. They think THEY know how to run the library and that THEY are the bosses. This must be one of the most difficult tasks for a new director -- marking his/her territory. The new director IS the boss and while you can accept ideas & suggestions from the oldies, you need to make your new library YOUR library and be the boss. It took me 10 years to learn this.

Beware of "oldies" who have a special liaison with board members. They will go right over your head every time! This happened to me within the first few months I was here. We had a staff member who was "like a daughter" to our board president. Whenever he came in, he never came to me to ask what was going on, he'd go to her. Finally, I politely asked her to please tell him to come to me (since I was the director). Next time he was in he pulled me aside and raked me over the coals for "harassing" this staff member who was "like a daughter" to him. Eeesh! I never harassed her. I couldn't have been more polite. Luckily he quit the board a few months after this. Anyway, at least in small towns where everyone knows everyone, staff members can be friends with board members (outside the library) -- beware of this!

Along the lines of expecting the unexpected, I knew I would have to learn how to do the budget and needed to learn the ins and outs of the community. But I was totally surprised at the number of times I had to deal with issues concerning the building. During my first month as director, I came in on a Sunday to show off the library to a friend. The downstairs, where the bathrooms are located, smelled like a sewer. I couldn't imagine what was causing it. How dumb could I be? My friend went into the men's restroom and reported that someone had stuffed the toilet with paper towels and excrement. So learn how to use a plunger. Then there was the odd smell in the elevator. Someone was urinating there on a regular basis. Enzyme cleaners work miracles.

On a more serious note, there were still issues from a recent renovation that needed to be addressed: a tile roof with loose tiles and an elevator pit with standing water. You are right about the heels and dress situation. I can now scamper up a ladder to the rooftop with no fuss and know how to climb down into the elevator pit. Truthfully, I had never imagined myself doing these things. Now it is all in a day's work.

Never assume your Board knows anything about the running of the library.

Never assume that an Interim librarian will be able to tell you about the library's set-up.

Remember Board members have no concept of what your daily routine may consist of.

It is an interesting job: Go with the flow!

It will take time to gain the Board's confidence. This is a long and sometimes painful process. Be patient and hang in there.

It is especially difficult to come in as a "change agent" even when that is what the Board says they wanted. Change is OK when the other guy is the one who has to change.

Your communication skills will be tested at every turn. Tell them the important stuff more than once and in more than one way.

Praise the people you work with even when they stumble in the right direction. The Director needs to be a cheerleader.

The Library Director isn't supposed to do everything. The Director is supposed to find the people to do what the Director can't do. Hire people who have the needed skills that you may not have.

Administration is delivered at your door wrapped in very large white nondescript packages. Then it is up to the people holding the administrative positions to add enthusiasm, energy, form, and leadership to the basics of librarianship. Get out your colorful magic markers or crayons and start drawing.

I believe that every director should read "Politics for Dummies". The question I often ask: If I had to run for office, would I be elected? If you have some doubt, you had better question what you are doing. If the community does not know about the library and the Director something has to happen to gain public support. We are always asking for tax support. Are we a "tax friendly place"? Can I show how wisely I am directing and spending "their money"? Would the last patron served rush right back on Friday and sign my pay check? This is just some of the things I would recommend.

I would like to recommend a set of books. They are from the Leader to Leader series of the Drucker Foundation. 1) Leader of the future, 2) Organization of the future and 3) Community of the future. These are new books to me. In reading them I believe they offer some exciting roles for the Library Director to take in the community. These books also fit the vision of Pat Steele as mentioned in the last Focus. I believe the Library Director must take a proactive role in the community and become the person that the community looks to for leadership and information. Just to add a little more.

The path to success as a library director is in knowing when to step back and realize that everything you have been taught about the job is not necessarily always right.

Since a director's relationship with the board can have a profound effect on one's life and stress level, set the tone for the relationship from the get-go. The director is the professional and the board needs to heed his/her advice and recommendations. (Not rubber-stamp it, or even necessarily agree with it.) And that can be done subtly without alienating the board (usually). Make your stand (if you need to) about boundaries, responsibilities, etc. early, because once those patterns are set, they are nearly impossible to change.

Be flexible. Treat your staff really well. Above all, don't obsess about the library during your own time.

Oh, and remember that what we do is important and valuable.

Just beginning I did NOT know the difference between the SBOA(State Board of Accounts) and the SBTC (State Board of Tax Commissioners)-(maybe that is why they finally changed their "name"-because of me). It would have been nice to have it explained what each department takes care of. Simple, yes...maybe now, ...but not back then. What I REALLY appreciated at the New Directors Meeting when I went, (first one offered), was to have as many from the Library Development office to meet face to face and what each of their jobs entailed.

I would strongly recommend you attach yourself like a leach to a director with lots of experience in another library (or the State Library Office) and ask lots of questions so you don't miss filing any forms on time!

My main advice to new directors is to talk to each other. Take advantage of the INPUBLIB listserv or face-to-face encounters at workshops and meetings. Never be afraid of "looking stupid" by asking what you suspect is a stupid question of other directors. There is no such thing! Everyone has been in your shoes at some point. I have learned so much directly from my peers.

Another suggestion: I work in a small library in a small town. If I have time, I like to get out at the circ desk, go outside and water the flowers or sweep the sidewalk, weed the collection, etc. It refreshes me to emerge from my office and interact with people (both staff and patrons) on a regular basis. And I don't want all my non-administrative skills to rust and become useless!

After grad school, I worked in an academic library. The school had a facilities maintenance department and an entire crew for cleaning, electrical work, plumbing... you name it. If the elevator didn't work, I called someone. Now I'm in a library that has a part-time janitor. We have a lot of people who will come fix things when needed, but there are a lot of times I find myself as "Ms. Fix-It."

What do I mean by that? Well, if the toilet clogs at 2 in the afternoon, I plunge it. If a child happens to come in with crackers and leaves a trail (he has to find his mom, right?), then I clean it up. When the toilet is blown up (no kidding!), I turn the water off and call the plumber, police and insurance agent. (This has only happened once. Knock on wood, please.)

As a director of a small to medium-sized library, you'll find yourself on the floor looking for shelf parts or unloading boxes -- computers, books, and anything else shipped to you. At some point you'll find yourself plunging toilets, cleaning windows, painting bathroom stalls, fixing shelves ... all kinds of things you never imagined yourself doing.

Of course, certain situations are not funny -- blown up toilets, for instance. But, I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that I can fix that shelf or put a piece of furniture together or any number of things that I do that one does not think a librarian normally does. Taking care of the building, furniture and equipment takes a lot of time -- certainly more than I ever imagined -- but it's a very important part of the job.

So, my advice to you is very simple: wear washable, comfortable clothes. Good luck!

1. Create a board meeting folder for each month of the year. Place the folder for the upcoming board meeting next to your desk and add things to it that you want to include on the agenda or on your monthly report.
2. Write a monthly report for your board to include "on the agenda" items and "information and updates." Get it all in so you can keep them informed and plant the seeds for future projects. I use this report as an historical record. **KEEP YOUR BOARD INFORMED** to gain their confidence.
3. Familiarize yourself with the services of the Library Development Office, the offerings of INCOLSA, the State Board of Accounts and the state tax board (can't remember their new name).
4. Learn how Form 4-B really works (from the bottom up) so you can strategize your budget each year.
5. Be adamant about going after your maximum levy each year.

6. Insist on employee benefits, especially PERF and health insurance.
7. Try to keep from burning out, and maintain a positive attitude as much as possible. Some battles are not worth fighting, and situations change. It is easy to get overwhelmed in this job, especially in a small library like this one.
8. Hire talent, and make every effort to pay them well--not easy to do.
9. Take ownership of your job.

I always tell folks who are new to the directing biz that they need to learn the basics of their building(s)'s HVAC asap. That, along with some elementary restroom management tools are a great way to start one's apprenticeship in library directing.

Why? It seems that as one takes on the position of library director there comes the "aura" of knowing how to do stuff nobody else does (or that no one has a great desire to learn about). Of course, the library director also gets the "big paycheck" and the recognition of the community so there are perks!

I am from a very small library with only one part-time assistant. I remember after I was hired that whenever I weeded a book off the shelf the former librarian would buy it. She hated for me to change anything or to get rid of any book, especially if she had purchased it. She would also still recommend books to patrons who were in the library, whether they asked or not. When I first started weeding the collection, there were books that had not been checked out in fifty years. The next week after I had taken them off someone would ask for them. Be patient and understanding when dealing with the former director. To them you may feel like an intruder in their domain.

A small librarian wears many hats. In order to brighten up the library, I told the board if they would provide the supplies, my assistant and I would paint the walls and refinish the woodwork. This work probably would not have been done, if they would have hired someone to do the work.

You will never do anything more important than coffee breaks at wherever your local business community meets. Gives a chance to informally answer questions and saves a whole lot of remonstrances as well as keeping up with the pulse of your non-users.

On the lighter side, I would say that people should remember the old saying—"Rome Was Not Built In A Day!" Sometimes when we are new we see all the things we would like to accomplish and forget that it can't all be done at once—prioritize and things will get accomplished. Don't be hard on yourself—if you are willing to learn and are conscientious it will all finally begin to make sense.

Remember that your staff and seeing to their well being is the most important thing you do as a director—nothing can be accomplished without their help. Be sure that you address their needs and give them plenty of praise and encouragement. Change is difficult for all of us and working for a new director will definitely be a change for them!

Attend all the training and workshops that you can so that you can learn what is required to run a successful library operation in Indiana. Ask questions and call people like the State Library employees, INCOLSA staff, etc. to ask questions of them.

Take the time to read old board minutes, files left by the previous director, library policies, procedures, library newsletters, etc. so that you will know what has happened before you arrived and write down questions you may have so that you can get the answers you need to do your job. We are often so eager to get started that we forget that a framework is necessary to succeed in any new position.

Take the time to get to know staff, board members, library users, etc. so that they will be comfortable with you from the very beginning.

Attend directors round tables, etc. and befriend a fellow director so that you will have someone whom you can call if questions arrive. Sometimes you can feel very alone as a director and we need the support of others who are doing the same job we are doing.

Going back a few years to my days as a library director, one piece of advice for new directors would be:

Get involved with your profession outside your library. Go to workshops, go to meetings, volunteer to serve on various library committees or do a variety of other things that are removed from your library. Make professional training a line item in your annual budget. This gets you out and about to meet and network with other librarians. Force yourself to do something else beyond go to the budget workshops each year. There are lots of workshops offered so take advantage and go to a few of them. INCOLSA offers all sorts of training classes that could be attended. The worse thing new directors can do is isolate themselves in their libraries.

Always make payroll! Staff will forgive you for many things, but if you don't have their money, you are in "unforgiving, never forgotten territory".

The public comes first! Sometimes we try to do things the easiest for staff and make it harder for the public. Many time, it should be the other way around.

Gain the Board's confidence, because it will go a long way toward supporting your day-to-day work and the direction you would like to take the library. The board hired you and they want you to succeed. However, you have to help them see they made a good hiring decision by quietly gaining their confidence and support. This will go a long way in their buy-in of all the future changes you might want to make in library service.

I do wish that my board would have been honest with me, or maybe they really didn't know, in the fact that bills hadn't been paid and checks not mailed out. I found checks in drawers that were never mailed out, etc. I wish someone would have told me that my board would not know as much about the library or even care about what was going on before I became Director.

I learned the hard way what needed to be in some policies. I still think a policy workshop would be good!!!

I wish someone would have told me that the sheriff would show up at my doorstep demanding we pay a penalty for something the last director neglected to pay! That was a real fun day.

Talk with other library directors-you can get much information in this manner.

Be creative! Be funny! Be practical! Be yourself! Seems to be the best advice one can give a new director.

Graduate school in 1975 talked a lot about looking and acting like a professional to over come the stereotype of little ole ladies in sensible shoes. (the sensible shoes come about 15 years and a child later into the job).

On the serious side, no one in grad school told me about how financial systems worked, especially Indiana's. Granted, I did the grad work in California and the public libraries prof. talked a lot about groveling and currying favor with the powers that controlled the money. However, upon investigation, it turned out IU did not discuss the practical aspects of where and how money flowed into the library. Everyone (staff, board, bookkeeper, director) needs some understanding of how the various income sources work, etc. Especially the difference between appropriations and cash. This would save a lot of grief and mistakes.

I approached my new job in a small town with the feeling people would relate to the library better, if they knew the Librarian was human. Previous librarians had either been distant or down right crabby, even though for the most part they were local. Forbidding and crabby are a

hard legacy to live down. However, I came from a small town type rural area, so I had 1/2 and idea of what to do. Fortunately the community is one of the most tolerant and cosmopolitan I have seen along with the standard caring and nose.

First, of course was to learn who was who and who was related to who (the better to keep one's foot from one's mouth). Where was the power and who were the power brokers.

My humanity campaign included answering reference questions posed from the adjoining stall of the women's room at the local American Legion. Telling stories from a rocking chair, while participation in a rocking chair marathon to raise money to start our annual Mint Festival (a board member roped me into that). The self same board member lured me and another staff member to run for Mint Queen. That was avoided in the future, by the expedient of becoming chair of the event. Letting the visiting pet tarantula walk all over my shoulders both in the Library and my church. (the spider was used for a children's sermon one Sunday to the horror of the minister) Probably making a fool of myself by dressing up to illustrate the theme of the summer reading programs and talking with school classes. Having everybody in town follow your pregnancy, from dead rabbit to final waddle.

Along the way, I seduced various staff member, board members, friends of the library members into different adventures to publicize the library and its programs.

My service district seems to respond to a very informal, folksy style of library service which may not be what is required in your situation. However, I firmly believe, friendly, active in the community and as proactive as possible does nothing but positive things for the library's reputation.

Top Ten Suggestions for New Library Directors:

1. Always carry as many keys as the custodian, and know which door each one unlocks.
2. Make sure all staff know recognize board members when they visit the library.
3. Attend every budget workshop offered.
4. Repeat #3 if needed.
5. Provide periodic staff pitch-in or pizza luncheons.
6. Keep a ready list of other directors to call for advice.
7. Remain neutral in times of board divisions.
8. Be prepared to meet the fire dept. at your library in the middle of the night due to alarm malfunctions - or worse.

9. Constantly support and provide training for staff.

10. Ring the phones off the hook at LDO - the consultants are every director's first source for information.

The best advice I ever got was TAKE A LAW CLASS. The next best thing was, "Get it though your head right now that very little that you learned in library school will be of any use on a day to day basis."

I would certainly focus on the fact that library school deals with library science and technology. It does not deal with the practical world of what a manager of any business does in day-to-day detail. The functions of management from a textbook position are important to show relationships to managing a library as a business. Human resources is generally not taught in the library science curriculum, but right from the start a new director needs to know employment law, ADA law, Equal Opportunity law, Family Medial Leave Act, OSHA, and the list goes on.

Practical maintenance of structures and simple "how to fix it" is important. Directors need to have common sense and the ability to trouble shoot electrical, plumbing, and mechanical problems. Directors need to understand the role of the director in community relations and public relations.

I would certainly them to the concept of "continuous improvement" as is being presented by Sara Laughlin and her associates. This concept can make "strategic" planning more a day-to-day activity than a five year project.

If someone would have told me what it was really like to deal with board members and that most of your headaches were personnel issues, I'm not sure if I would have taken this job. I ask myself on an almost-daily basis: "Did I go to library school for this?" I went to IU SLIS, not the IU School of Business!

There's no way you can please everyone. Just please the majority (including yourself) and live with it!

1a. (I should have put this first). Don't be afraid to ask questions!!!

1. Put the annual calendar of things to do, i.e. deadlines for forms, reports, budgets, etc. where you'll see it often.

2. Go to library meetings (training sessions, ILF conferences (annual and district), library discussion groups) and meet your peers. Call them when you have a question. Car pool to meetings when you can.
3. Volunteer to serve on a committee (another great way to meet other librarians).
4. Go visit other libraries, especially ones about the same size as yours. Ask them how they do things.
5. Sign up for INCOLSA-L and other library list serves. If you don't know how to email, find out, it's important.
6. Read up on it. At least read through the Table of Contents of the Library Laws and Library Budget Manual. Read "In the Public Trust."

I did write a paper when I was in library school & one of the best things that I like to recommend is: USE your library. I feel it is always a good idea to walk in the front door & browse the shelves & actually check out materials; helps to understand where the library users is coming from.

I would also recommend to new director's to take time to appreciate all staff. Too often when there is a new boss the training is not always the best so doing the little extras to show staff how important there is helpful.

The other thing that helped me a lot was to introduce myself to those that will be helping you in your community; like the mailman & bank tellers, newspaper reporters etc. It helps to make a good one on one first impression.

1. When, during the interview or right after you are hired, you are told there have been "personnel problems" be prepared for an all out war among the staff.
2. Learn all you can about building maintenance, dealing with contractors, heating and cooling systems, preparing bid documents/quotes, building insurance, etc. They don't teach you any of that in library school.
3. If you haven't already, take a basic course in bookkeeping/accounting. They don't teach that in library school either.
4. Learn all you can about human resources and related personnel issues (health insurance, life insurance, retirement programs, cafeteria plans, and other personnel type benefits). You will be explaining all that, not only to your staff, but to your board.

5. Develop a thick skin. You will take abuse from staff, board, and the public.
6. Keep your sense of humor and be able to laugh at yourself and your mistakes. You will acquire a few more gray hairs, but you will enjoy your work.
7. Never let anyone tell you that it is boring working in a public library. You meet some of the most interesting people in the world. The kids are so cute; the elderly are sweethearts; and 98% of the people who come thru your doors are the best; just deal with the other 2% the best you can and don't let them get to you.

My jaded advice after 9 years as a public library director: If you don't have a sense of the absurd, develop one immediately. Never forget who you are serving. Make sure you are not talking to a relative if you are complaining about a patron! (In fact, it's best not to do that at all.) Never forget that chances are good, some library director somewhere has already dealt with the problem facing you. Ask for help. You'll either get a great solution or realize that the road you were planning on taking is the WRONG ONE! If you can't get involved in the library world at the national or state level, at least network with other library directors in your area. Never say anything to a reporter that you don't want to be quoted on. (Or even worse, mis-quoted.) Laugh a lot. It relieves tension.

What has helped me the most is networking and getting help and advice from other vintage directors.

Since this is a small library, being friendly and always listening to our patrons has helped increase our circulation.

One more suggestion, as I go to INCOLSA workshops and gain training and library information, I then pass it on to my staff.

Top Ten List for New Directors

10. Delegate, delegate, delegate!
9. Document, document, document!
8. If you ignore it, it doesn't go away--it gets worse.
7. Recognize/reinforce desired behavior--remember Pavlov's dogs.

6. Your administrative assistant (or equivalent) rules your universe--never tick them off.
5. Murphy's Law runs a close second for ruling your universe.
4. Keep a change of attire (from the skin out) at work.
3. Remember chocolate is a mood-altering drug.
2. "This above all: to thine own self be true."
1. Know when to quit.

Sign up for the mentoring program and use your mentor. If your area has one, go to the to the Public Library Directors' meeting once a month. The old-timers are a wealth of experience and information and can walk you through just about anything.

Never ask your staff to do any task you would not do yourself, save trades skills, like wiring. This has been my primary management technique for twenty years, and it has served me well. No one (who remained in my employ) has ever balked about an assigned task, as each has seen me do the task. This takes a lot of time and effort, but is the foundation for a terrific staff.

There is only one kind of mistake - people mistakes. Paper mistakes, whether truly on paper or on electronic file, are correctable. Paper mistakes can be edited, deleted or corrected, and people mistakes involve different individuals with different backgrounds. People mistakes are difficult, if not impossible, to set to rights.

When planning a new facility or remodeling an existing one, the FIRST rule is: "Toilets mount on the floor, not on the water." This is an adaptation of "Water seeks its lowest point."

The SECOND rule is: "Windows are for ventilation, not decoration."

Work with the public every week, if not every day. Keep in touch with your patrons and with humans in general. This will help you stayed focus on the main point of what we do - serve people. We check out books, answer questions, deliver programs, yeah, all that. The reason we do these things is to SERVE PEOPLE. When you lose sight of that you lose your reason for being a Library Director.

If you don't have a good sense of humor, develop one. Quickly. You're going to need it.
