



The Board/Staff Relationship

Most libraries have staff other than the director--assistant director, librarians, clerks, bookkeeper, maintenance workers. Understanding the relationship of the board to those other staff members is vital to maintenance of a smooth running library just as it is to any business.

A poor understanding of the board/staff relationship is the cause of much confusion and chaos.

Technically, the board approves employment of all staff, pay and major working conditions (IC 36-12-2-24(b)). But practically, the board/staff relationship cannot be the traditional employer/employee relationship.

IC36-12-2-24(a)
Only one
employee
reports
to the board

In practice, only one employee reports to the board--the director--because that is the most efficient way to run any business. Employees need to clearly understand who gives the orders, who is accountable to whom and who has responsibility for what. To do that the board creates a chain of command that sets up clear lines of authority and accountability.

The chain of command is designed to make things work, not to stifle communication. It is, in fact, a communications system in itself.

The board hires the director to be the library's expert in management of the library, and that includes managing all other personnel.

The board delegates the responsibility for managing personnel to the director. Although the director recommends to the board, for their approval, the hiring and firing of the staff, it is the director who is responsible for supervising, evaluating and disciplining all staff. The director is accountable to the board for the performance of all staff.

The chain of command has rules

The chain of command has rules that must be respected to keep communication flowing:

- Under a chain of command structure, the board has no direct responsibility for day-to-day supervision of staff other than overseeing the director. Board members have no authority to issue orders to staff or make demands of staff except through the director.

- Under a chain of command structure, the board has no direct responsibility for assessing staff performance other than the director. The director should be expected to give regular reports about staff performance so the board can be assured that the work of the library is being done well, but the board does not formally evaluate staff.

- Under a chain of command, the board does not act on complaints from the staff, except through a grievance procedure that is board policy.

Staff members often fail to understand or choose to ignore the chain of command and go around the director to take concerns and complaints directly to the board or to individual board members. When such a "short circuit" occurs, it is the board member's responsibility to remind the staff member about the chain of command and the proper grievance procedure for such concerns or complaints.

Problems are always best resolved at the lowest possible level on the chain and should be directed there. Concerns or complaints that come directly to board members should be reported to the director for resolution, by proper procedure.

Breakdown of the chain of command creates problems

When board members fail to adhere to the chain of command, the result is damage to the library's efficient operation. The director's authority to manage staff is compromised. You can't hold the director accountable for staff performance if the board manages staff.

Staff morale will be damaged when the chain of command is broken. Staff will not have a clear understanding of who is in charge and to whom they are accountable.

Once a short circuit between board and staff is allowed to happen, the precedent is set that will be hard to break. Staff will believe they can come to the board with every issue. The director becomes an ineffective figurehead without real authority.

Acceptance of the chain of command does not mean that a wall is placed between the board and staff. Staff, director and board members must still view themselves as one team and that team has one common mission to accomplish--service to the community.

*There is a
board/staff
relationship*

Each part of the library team has special assignments in the team effort and those assignments compliment the special assignments of the other members of the team. But the team members do not work in isolation.

- Board members may often work with director and staff members in committee settings.
- Board, director and staff must all be part of the long-range planning process.
- Staff members will frequently make reports at the board meeting.
- Board members, director and staff should get together for library social events, because those events can be powerful team-builders.

As a board member, you should show concern for the well-being of staff. The board should be concerned about retention of good staff by budgeting for reasonable pay and benefits. The board should give recognition of good staff performance and say thanks to staff through board action.



But it is imperative that board members base any relationship with staff on the chain of command. Social occasions cannot be an excuse for discussing complaints about the library. Staff appearances at board meetings cannot be an excuse to appeal to the board for a program that the director has already vetoed.



Notes: