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Relationships Matter in Politics

Michelle Boisvenue-Fox

“It takes a certain kind of person to be comfortable enough to open up to loving many different kinds of people, as well as earning the respect of others with a variety of political viewpoints. Werner does this with empathy and genuineness.”

In life, people matter - and it's no different in politics, despite its bad reputation. Lance Werner, Library Journal's 2018 Librarian of the Year, puts this in action by purposefully reaching out to area legislators. He doesn't just do the expected things that many library leaders do; he also focuses on what he calls “the mushy stuff.” Werner's passion for libraries is palpable in all of his conversations, inspiring legislators to believe in Michigan libraries and act on those beliefs. The taxpayers of Michigan matter to Werner.

Werner, Library Director of the Kent District Library (Mich.), has found success by building relationships and connections with local legislators regardless of their political affiliation. In being purposeful and casting his net wide, he has proven that this approach is beneficial to the library and the Michigan library community. Werner's approach to serving the West Michigan community is to value people, to treat everyone with the kindness, empathy, and the love that they deserve. This soft approach may appear unusual as a professional tenet, but his successful library system continues to be a leader in the state and across the nation. It has opened the library up to many new community relationships, innovative approaches to help solve community problems, and has attracted many new friends with the hope that others will tell the library's story during the next millage campaign in 2024.

It takes a certain kind of person to be comfortable enough to open up to loving many different kinds of people, as well as earning the respect of others with a variety of political viewpoints. Werner does this with empathy and genuineness.

What follows are several stories of Werner building relationships to help Michigan libraries politically.

Kent District Library Millage Success (2014)

One of the first stories librarians should hear about Werner is how the Michigan Tea Party supported our

2014 Library Millage increase. In 2013, when Kent District Library was starting to line up their talking points for their informational campaign and decide how to focus the millage campaign, the local Tea Party organization (Kent County 'Taxpayers' Alliance) approached the library with concern about a tax increase for local residents. Werner took a different tact than they were expecting; he met with them and brought along the library's financial records. They asked question after question which Werner answered honestly. He was open about the library's operations and spending. He talked about the savings to the 27 communities the library serves that is achieved through a variety of efficiencies. The library was both transparent and accountable.

With this approach, Werner started a relationship with local leadership that continues to this day. Werner not only made a case for the library, but asked them for advice on getting support for the millage. It probably didn't hurt that one of the tea party members used the library, so were familiar with its services, but Werner was humble about the library's commitment to the communities and sincere in his ask for support. In the end, the support that the Tea Party gave KDL included staff training on sharing our library story with every group in our county, as well as personally walking door to door in select communities in support of our library millage. KDL passed its millage with 57%, that is the highest percentage in the library's history. And, they won in voting precincts that had never passed a tax millage.

Since this millage, Werner has gone on to work for Michigan libraries alongside the Michigan Library Association (MLA) in its efforts to elevate libraries' standing with legislators by increasing their knowledge about library funding. As a result of Werner's efforts with MLA, all libraries in Michigan are now seeing more money in their budgets. In talking to Werner, he bases his words of wisdom on his past success and his approach to fostering relationships with local legislators. “Be genuine and listen to all,” Werner says. By being open to others viewpoints, you learn what matters to them and understand what they consider a problem. “It's always personal,” he'll say. Everything is personal and it can be tied to the library. Legislators do care about their local communities and ultimately they believe in what libraries do when given the opportunity.

Bill to Eliminate February Millage Elections (2014)

Alongside the Michigan Library Association, Werner was contacted by a local legislator before a bill was introduced and able to make the case to change what was originally going to be proposed. Legislators wanted to eliminate millage elections in February, May and August which left the only option for libraries (and others) to pass a millage in the November election. With libraries, this is not ideal since it only gives them one chance to successfully pass a millage, and if it's an operating millage, it could mean they have to close the library.

Through his strategic relationships, Werner was given a heads up that this bill was being introduced. He then had an opportunity to influence it and negotiate a change that benefitted libraries. The compromise only eliminated the February election. In the end, the bill did not pass, but this relationship allowed the Michigan Library Association an opportunity to have a conversation before the bill was introduced on its effects for libraries.

In regards to advocacy, Werner advises leaders to “talk passionately about what you care about.” Passion is contagious and it shows that both the library leader and legislator care about the library. With this personal relationship, there is a personal connection to the library.

In being purposeful, Werner suggests further building on this personal relationship, but “do it ahead of time so that you are not contacting legislators in the moment of need.” It doesn't work as effectively if you don't already know them and have worked with them. It can be seen as a political cry for help instead of a request from a personal friend.

Millage Campaigns and Elimination of Factual Information Averted (2016)

Later, a bill was introduced into the state legislator that would have banned the dissemination of factual information 60 days prior to a millage election. This would open the door for special interest campaigns to wage war against any municipal millages, including libraries without consequence. Werner worked again with the Michigan Library Association (and many other groups) to personally contact legislators to educate them on how this would affect libraries. They got the message that this bill went against some important American values, such as free

access to information and being transparent with voters when information is important to their decisions at the poll. It is already illegal for government entities to use public funds to solicit “yes” votes, so this bill was utterly unnecessary. Ultimately, a permanent injunction was signed by a US District Court judge that stopped this bill, declaring it an infringement on constitutional rights.

Kent District Library used its experience with their library millage. They talked personally about how this legislation would have affected their local library and its efforts to talk to community groups and offer community presentations on what the library is planning in the future.

Another tactic Werner uses successfully is to offer help to legislators. This might be lost on people, but offering to help (again personally) to support campaigns means something and is noticed by legislators. Spending time with them, whether it's a lunch, inviting them to a banquet (ideally where the library receives an award) or a fundraiser can matter. “It's about treating them as friends,” Werner will tell you. “With lobbyists, they are there when legislators need information but it's after the issues are over that matters,” says Werner. If you are genuine about making this a personal relationship, then you work to connect with them at different points along the way. If leaders are only around for the issues, then it's solely a professional relationship.

Tax Capture Victory (2017)

Libraries have long wanted a conversation with legislators on giving libraries the option to opt in to tax captures if they so desire, instead of being treated like schools and being automatically opted out of tax captures by local entities, such as development authorities. Since Werner has personal relationships with local legislators, he knows how to contact them. He is familiar with their staff. This “mushy” stuff, as he calls it, helps him find advocates for the library. So, when the Tax Capture Relief Bills were introduced, he made sure that local legislators knew about them and how they impacted their local libraries. After two decades of work on this effort, library leaders saw the fruits of their efforts when the legislature passed this exemption, with libraries being the fourth special entity included. While this didn't affect existing tax captures, it does mean that millions of future dollars will go into library budgets instead of being captured.

It is important to Werner to foster relationships on both sides of the political fences. “Despite political beliefs, you should always find something in common,” Werner says. At the end of the day, we all want the best for our families and communities. Werner further says, “Recognize that they have an obligation as a legislator. Being angry about their decisions isn’t conducive to the bigger picture.” It’s good to keep in mind what can’t be changed or influenced and to let go of what will happen based on political ideologies.

Being vulnerable

Werner finds it valuable to be vulnerable. Showing kindness and empathy to local legislators can make some leaders feel vulnerable, but Werner takes it a step further. “Be willing to share yourself. This takes a lot to do this,” Sharing yourself puts your own values, family, stories, and work life on parade for possible judgement. As part of being genuine, it is important to be yourself and open up to share the things you care about. This vulnerability is necessary to find a connection with a legislator.

Werner has taken this advice to great lengths for the benefit of his library and all libraries in Michigan. So for starters, take the advice of general advocacy training, but then to grab the golden ring of success, dig deep to build these relationships on personal level. These unexpected relationships will have a deep impact on your library work and on your community.

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