Public Library Directors: Hierarchical Roles and Proximity to Power

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ABSTRACT
ACCESS TO POWER AND RECOGNITION of the drifts and currents of political life represent the greatest challenge to positioning for the library and its leader. Clear vision is vital to successfully navigate a multitude of constituencies and their conflicting desires. The director's hierarchical position may or may not be of value in his/her quest for that for which he is ultimately held responsible: the success or failure of the goals of the public library.

> "Men of power have no time to read;
> yet the men who do not read are unfit for power."
> —Michael Foot, *Debts of Honour*, 1981, p. 22.

A long-held assumption about the effectiveness of a library director has been that the individual is effective in relation to how high in the organization the job places him or her. This is an assumption that has never been verified. To test the hypothesis, several public library directors were asked to share their experiences and observations (see Appendix), either in writing or during an interview, concerning placement in the organizational structure and the real or perceived strength of the library. Because the sample size was small, the data's validity may not be broadly applicable.

It must be noted that public libraries operate within a wide variety of governmental structures. Organizational configurations include municipal, county, multijurisdictional, school district, state, and independent taxing districts (Scheppke, 1991, pp. 288-89). Even with

so many kinds of organizations, there are still only a limited number of variations in the reporting hierarchy for public library directors. Although there are profound differences in working in any of these organizational structures, there is no empirical or research-based evidence that the organizational framework affects the performance of the library within it.

The most desirable position for a public library director is to report to the individual with the most power. In a municipal library, that translates as reporting to the mayor. The City of Houston, for example, operates under a strong-mayor form of government; it is so strong that one veteran city councilman recently likened it to "King Kong and the 14 chimps" (Ryan, 1993, p. 1A). In this writer's experience, which includes twenty-seven years as library director and dealing with the administrations of five of these strong mayors, the mayor controls the library's fortunes, for good or bad, but in ways that have almost nothing to do with the library director's degree of access to the chief executive. Houston Public Library got its most generous funding from the one mayor of the five who was probably least familiar with library issues. Under another mayor, who served ten years in office (and with whom the library director enjoyed a collegial relationship), library conditions seriously worsened. An "open door" policy under a mayor does not guarantee opened purse strings anymore than holding certain political convictions in common with a mayor leads to a bigger budgetary commitment to the library.

A library director in Minnesota said:

> I believe you can do more and be more visible if there is less of a hierarchy to move through. The fewer people who have to give you permission to go ahead the easier it should be to take the reins and gallop on. However, the more you can do on your own, the more responsibility you have to do the "right thing" or at least not the wrong thing. (Susan Goldberg Kent, personal communication, July 21, 1993)

In the traditional municipal structure with a city manager, the library director will usually report to an assistant city manager. At this distance from the top of the hierarchy, position within the organization can diminish the director's own view of the power or impact he or she has. This perception was understood by one public library director:

> The Phoenix Public Library stands as a good (or rather should I say bad) example of the problem of a poor position in the city organization combined with poor city support. But I have never been able to determine for sure what is cause and what is effect. Are we low in the city hierarchy because the city doesn't care much about libraries, or is the city supporting us poorly because we are so low in the hierarchy? I do know that my position

> in the hierarchy makes it very difficult for me to get better support. (Ralph M. Edwards, personal communication, September 20, 1993)

At the opposite extreme, there is the structure of an independent taxing district in which the director ordinarily has much more freedom. One library director who reports to an independent taxing district board said, "I like having the independence of not being part of city government and, on any given day, for at least 50 percent of the time, I am glad that I have an elected board" (Susan Goldberg Kent, personal communication, July 21, 1993).

From the perspective of a former city manager, position in the organizational structure has some importance, but it does not have a significant impact on effectiveness. The librarian needs to be close to the top of the hierarchy so that he or she can have some interaction and relationship with the top official, but actual placement in the structure is not overly important. The typical director needs authority, but it is also important to have leadership qualities, to be able to focus on the tasks at hand, and to communicate the library's mission (Albert Haines, personal communication, June 16, 1993).

Another aspect of the reporting hierarchy deals with the turnover of elected officials and their agenda while in office. A California city librarian commented:

> I have worked under four City Managers and five Mayors in my fourteen years as City Librarian. The eight member City Council has had at least three replacements in each Council District during this period. I personally have reported to six Deputy City Managers. A former City Manager said that to understand the motives of an elected official, you have to realize that they are either trying to get re-elected to their own office or are seeking a higher office, and this drives all their decisions. (William B. Sonnwald, personal communication, May 19, 1993)

Ongoing communication is necessary to be knowledgeable about the agenda of the person, whether elected or appointed, to whom the librarian reports. It is also important for the library to make itself a part in that agenda by portraying its programs in ways that help the top official achieve his or her chief priorities.

Another experienced municipal library director observed:

> If a library has a direct reporting relationship to a powerful and prestigious figure who does not value the library, this produces a much weaker position than the library might be able to build with a less direct or less clear reporting relationship. (Rick J. Aston, personal communication, May 12, 1993)

In Houston's recent run-off elections, a restless electorate and a wave of anti-incumbency sentiment put new faces into seven out

of eight available seats on the city council. When there is so much change in elected leadership or at any level of municipal governance, one of two things usually happens. Without continuity of leadership, it can be difficult for the director to retain ongoing support for the library's programs. In the other scenario, the library is left to operate pretty much as an independent entity. There are advantages and disadvantages to both situations. One library director, who describes herself as having "a great deal of power both real and implied," contended:

> This power is contingent on the Board's trust and faith in me, in my leadership and direction of the Library, and in my partnership with them. Understanding the nature of the relationship of the Board and Director is essential but not easy. I see it as a partnership, not an employer-employee relationship. They govern, set policy—I lead, provide vision, and direction—together we move the library forward, create support in the community, communicate with other elected officials and grow and prosper. (Susan Goldberg Kent, personal communication, July 21, 1993)

Power equates with control over resources, but its use depends on reins tied to other powerful people. Power sometimes comes from position in the hierarchy (Albert Haines, personal communication, June 16, 1993).

However, there are those who take an exactly opposite view of the effect of the reporting relationship. A dissenting administrator remarked:

> Reporting relationships and alliances do not seem to me to make a great deal of difference for libraries and library directors. We can look around the country and find politically strong libraries and politically weak libraries whose institutional positions are virtually identical. We rarely see effective alliances between libraries and other municipal or county entities, but rather a Hobbesian war of all against all in most city/county government situations. (Rick J. Aston, personal communication, May 12, 1993)

As Scheppke (1991) concluded, it has not been proven that there is a strong relationship between type of public library governance and "financial support and effectiveness" (p. 293). However, not being near the top of the hierarchy requires the director to seek other ways to make himself visible in the organization. There is a corollary view to the prior statement, summarized by Sonnwald:

> As probably in all organizations, San Diego has a corporate culture that really is the key factor in determining political power. The manager likes Department Heads to keep a low profile and to make sure that the elected officials get all the credit. He does not like staff to "get ahead of the issues" or to suggest change that may be of conflict with the agenda of elected officials. Above

all else, he wants us all to be responsive to the community.
(William B. Sonnwald, personal communication, May 19, 1993)

If this view prevails, the director can be faced with either a
quandary or an opportunity. It is a win-win situation if the library
is in a position to give credit to the elected officials for programs
that are central to the library, because the elected officials get credit
and the library gets support for its programs. However, if there is
no legitimate way to involve elected officials in the library's programs,
the director may be in a position where the library will languish
because it has no visibility.

Being visible can translate into a successful political and public
relations record of achievements. In any size of library, the director
and key staff must tell the "library story" so that the library is not
a forgotten entity. This means not only attending meetings but also
assuming community leadership roles to improve the visibility and
credibility of the library (Lee B. Brawner, personal communication,
May 27, 1993).

It is important to establish that the library is an essential service
to the community. As one expert noted: "The more people use, know
about, support and love the library, the more they can exert their
power to influence decision makers" (Gates, 1991, pp. 114-15).

There are three power bases in any community: (1) elected
officials, (2) business community, and (3) press (Marilyn Gell Mason,
personal communication, June 29, 1993). The library can profit from
close ties with these three groups in several ways. These groups can
help in promoting library issues at the local level and in taking
library legislation to the state level. They can also assist at the federal
level when library legislation is at issue (Lee B. Brawner, personal
communication, May 27, 1993).

There is another view, represented by Aston:

It is my general sense that elected leaders all over the United
States are less powerful than they were 20 years ago. Government
plebiscite, rather than government by elected representatives, is
the theme of our time, with results that can help public libraries.
Of all local government services, public libraries are inevitably
the most popular. Active library users also tend to be active
citizens. This connection, as we move further and further into
government in the voting booth, will be to our benefit if we
can mobilize and energize it. Excellent service, excellent
management, clear and honest direction are great starting points
for constituency building. Beyond them, we must inform the
public and help them to know that their own personal decisions
will affect the library's ability to serve them well. (personal
communication, May 12, 1993)

Today more than ever, public libraries have a distinctive role in
promoting community participation and support. According to Gates
(1991):

> Economic determinism and the new rolling coalitions in support
> of "self-government" are opening still new positioning strategies
> for the library to draw closer to local politics and power. The
> emerging movement is what former San Antonio Mayor, former
> National Civic League Chairman, and now Secretary of Housing
> and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros calls "citizen
> democracy" or the creative intermeshing and positive interaction
> of business, government, community groups and citizen
> involvement. (pp. 114-15)

Citizens are becoming more vocal and better organized on issues:
this, in turn, has a strong influence on our elected officials. They
must listen or relinquish their positions. As a service valued by voters,
libraries can gain from increased civic involvement. The library can
reinforce its position as a player in the community when more and
more elected officials have to be concerned with how voters will
respond to their library-related decisions (Susan Goldberg Kent,
personal communication, July 21, 1993).

Donald J. Sager, former public library director, noted that public
library directors have to have access to the city's power brokers—
and that means involvement in those groups and organizations where
power tends to gravitate (Carrigan, 1992, pp. 337-38). Another director
said this in a slightly different way:

> In the larger framework, the power of a public library to set
> and carry out its agenda depends most heavily on its ability to
> identify and mobilize a popular constituency. One of the many
> things that mayors, county commissioners, and other elected
> leaders can do is count votes. If it is clear that voters care about
> the library, elected leaders will care. The flip side of this is that
> the library and the library director cannot be seen to mobilize
> or motivate this constituency. It must seem to spring up of its
> own accord. (Rick J. Aston, personal communication, May 12,
> 1993)

Power or influence that can serve the library well can come from
support groups such as Friends organizations, as Sonnwald (1993)
pointed out:

> Since I have been Director, the Friends of the Library has grown
> from an organization of less than twenty people to over 4,000
> paid members and a group at all of our 32 branch libraries. They
> are an effective group for drawing attention to the needs of the
> library and the City Council listens to them, as well as a strong
> lobbying group. When the Mayor and City Manager needed
> community support to extend a spending authorization in the
> City, the Friends and their telephone tree got out the vote. The

> Mayor gave the Friends credit for passage of the waiver in a
> very close election. My role is to send a representative to their
> meetings to act as a resource person. We do not try to control
> the Friends because I think they are stronger if they are viewed
> as independent of library administration influence.

Power also comes from a different orientation than organization
structure. Sonnwald went on to say that his power evolved from
directing a service that is valued and appreciated by the citizens of
the community (William B. Sonnwald, personal communication, May
19, 1993). For example, when Houston's mayor ordered a reduction
in library hours to stem a city budget shortfall in March 1988, it
was not administrative appeals but library users picketing outside
locked doors and public protests reported by the media that quickly
got longer hours reinstated.

There is another slightly different view of power and politics
offered by Brawner:

> Recognizing the power of information and the access to it is,
> of course, no news for libraries. But, the political shift described
> by Gates and others makes library administrators more cognizant
> of the library's catalytic role as information brokers, especially
> with regard to accessing electronic publishing information loads.
> The shift at once places heightened emphasis on the role of
> information and politics for libraries in the community. Are
> libraries now poised to make their own paradigm shift as the
> infostructure of the infrastructure in their communities? (Lee
> B. Brawner, personal communication, May 27, 1993)

Dealing with multiple and sometimes conflicting constituencies
requires tact, understanding, discretion, flexibility, and knowing when
to apply pressure and when to let the group act independently. The
effective director must also be able to articulate the relationship of
external pressures to internal pressures (Lee B. Brawner, personal
communication, May 27, 1993). When a director cannot coalesce
various groups on specific issues, there may be many reasons, but
in the end, the responsibility is that of the director, and it will often
be viewed as a weakness (Albert Haines, personal communication,
June 16, 1993).

The successful director has a clarity of purpose in effectively
demonstrating the necessity for library service to the library's many
constituencies. Politics are variable, so the effective director moves
beyond the traditional role of librarian and administrator to one of
a lobbyist working with and among the diverse constituencies of
the library.

A more direct view of the director's role is provided by Susan
Goldberg Kent:

> One of the things I have learned about being a Director is that
> you can't please everyone and you have to understand that not
> everyone will like you. This goes with the job. If you have to
> make tough decisions, then those decisions are likely to offend
> or upset one group or another. That's life and that's why we
> get paid the big bucks.
>   Even though it is not possible to make everyone happy, the
> director must try to address the expressed needs and concerns
> as astutely as possible and be as politically aware as possible
> to be able to advance the library's cause in the community and
> to provide the best possible service (Susan Goldberg Kent,
> personal communication, July 21, 1993).

More than anything else, the effectiveness or success of the
director is not dependent upon status or position in the organizational
structure but rather on the leadership, charisma, and the ability to
mobilize constituencies. Power is more diffuse today because officials
are now elected by more heterogeneous groups, each with its own
agenda, thereby creating a patchwork of constituencies with little
in common. It must also be recognized that the electorate is more
active today than it was twenty years ago. Power becomes a
combination of being able to accurately judge the city's vision and
then to produce in a way that incorporates the city's visions into
the library's needs (Albert Haines, personal communication, June
16, 1993).

The effectiveness of the public library director originates from
close proximity to three sources of real or perceived power: (1) having
a role high up in the hierarchical structure of government; (2) acquir-
ing political influence from close alliances with like-minded
politicians and elected officials; and, (3) appealing directly to grass-
roots constituencies for support. Clearly, from the opinions shared
by the library directors polled, achieving a position of power is more
a matter of the positive public image of the library (or the director's
own assessment of his degree of empowerment) than it is empirically
based.

APPENDIX

Interviews were held with the following individuals:

Albert Haines, President, Houston Partnership, June 16, 1993.
Marilyn Gell Mason, Director, Cleveland Public Library, June 29, 1993.

Correspondence was received from the following individuals:

Rick J. Aston, City Librarian, Denver Public Library, May 12, 1993.
Lee B. Brawner, Executive Director, Metropolitan Library System, Oklahoma
    City, OK, May 27, 1993.
Ralph M. Edwards, City Librarian, City of Phoenix, September 20, 1993.
Susan Goldberg Kent, Director, Minneapolis Public Library, July 21, 1993.
William B. Sonnwald, City Librarian, City of San Diego, May 19, 1993.

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