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Leadership Issues for Building Resilient Library Associations

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"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."

- Max DePee

Introduction

As many libraries begin to reinvent themselves for the information age, library associations face challenges and opportunities to keep apace of the emerging needs of their stakeholders, while maintaining existing missions that define each association's core business. Library association managers need a rich knowledge base to improve the ability of their associations to provide high quality services to libraries to ensure sustainability. Libraries are experiencing a great deal of pressure to increase the efficiency of their operations and effectiveness of their services because user needs are changing, government scrutiny increasing, public support waning, and commercial competition growing. Mandates for reform with the goal of improved organizational performance are made with little or no commitment of increased financial support to help libraries increase their capacity to perform at higher levels, resulting in having to do more with less.

This has a ripple effect through library associations, which depend on libraries for a raison d'être and financial support. It is crucial that library associations take time for self-reflection to know what value they offer to their memberships, what are their core business functions, and what distinguishes them from competitors, especially other library associations. Without some serious thought given to these questions, any association may be in jeopardy of losing its license to operate in the eyes of its constituency, which could lead to the ultimate failure of the organization.

I will address a number of issues germane to library associations, drawing on literature from the business sector, library profession, and nonprofit sector. Many of the resources cited in this paper were written from a North American perspective, although I believe the ideas and their meanings have a broader appeal and application. What have emerged are a focused set of values for library associations, an inventory of business functions for consideration in self-assessment and identifying areas for improvement, and an amalgam of conceptual frameworks for thinking through the issues.

A fundamental starting point of this paper is that libraries and library associations share many values in common, and both are by and large nonprofit organizations. However, the business functions and organizational structures of many library associations are significantly different from those of libraries. The mise-en-scène for this exposition on library associations is primarily literature from the nonprofit and voluntary sector. I will use the term *nonprofit organization* or a derivative—instead of nongovernmental organization—throughout this essay for the sake of consistency, although they could arguably be used interchangeably.

Values

What values are at the heart of library associations? Little is written on the values of library associations per se, while there is a sizeable corpus of literature on the values of the library profession on one hand, and nonprofit organizations on the other. Where library associations have made formal statements about their values, many of the statements themselves are indistinguishable from what may be said about libraries. There are connections and a transfer of values from one to the other, which make logical sense and are useful for thinking through the question. The first three points of IFLA's *Core Values* are a good example: (1) an endorsement for freedom of access to information; (2) a belief that access to information is necessary for societies to improve the quality of life for all citizens; (3) a conviction that the delivery of high quality library services ensures access to information (IFLA 2008). Nonetheless, there are values distinct to library associations apart from what they share with libraries, and IFLA's final core value—a commitment to enable membership participation in all its activities—addresses this distinction.

Our Enduring Values lists eight central values of librarianship, of which the first two are especially significant for library associations, i.e., *stewardship* and *service* (Gorman 2000). While libraries provide stewardship of collections and service to user communities, library associations provide stewardship and services to libraries. Borrowing a concept from *On Being Nonprofit* (Frumkin 2002), stewardship and service address the "instrumental dimension" of what justifies the existence of library associations—their importance as instruments of libraries for the accomplishment of collective action. Equally meaningful, library associations possess an "expressive dimension" that empowers libraries to express their values and channel shared convictions through advocacy, collaboration, community building, and political action through solidarity. The expressive and instrumental dimensions of library associations directly connect them to library user communities for the advancement of the greater

common good, which is why for instance advocacy is a significant part of the missions of many library associations.

Driving stewardship and service to libraries is a force of *professionalism* exemplified across all kinds of and throughout all levels of organizations. Many national and international library associations are managed by administrators with professional degrees and specialized training, while at the same time an extensive network of large association chapters and smaller associations operate mainly through voluntary effort. This vast volunteer workforce embodies a wealth of expertise and experience with no less professionalism than many paid or highly trained employees. Indeed many library association volunteers are paid professionals who work for libraries and allied organizations. These individuals leverage their expertise and knowledge in volunteer roles, matching desire and self-motivation to improve both their own skill sets and the effectiveness of their organizations. This insures that values of professionalism permeate throughout library associations from the grassroots up through more hierarchically structured organizations.

Anatomy of a Library Association

If stewardship, service, and professionalism enliven the hearts and minds of library associations, business functions and organizational structure render shape and form. The skeletal framework of what gives structure to a library association is often complex and the parts contiguous, encompassing everything from budgeting to public relations. There are a variety of approaches for cataloging the components of library associations qua nonprofit organizations, and some business functions are common to all organizations regardless of age, annual budget, mission, or size of membership. Others will likely manifest only in larger, older organizations with more bureaucratic structures.

The list below attempts to inventory the anatomy of library associations, regardless of their myriad missions and activities such as advocacy, consulting, publishing, research and development, service provision, and training:

- Leading
    - Articulate a vision and mission
    - Align goals, objectives, and business functions with mission
    - Plan a business strategy for continuity and sustainability
    - Acquire resources to fulfill mission and advance organization
    - Motivate participation in mission-critical activities at all levels
- Organizing
    - Establish organizational structure, governance, and staffing requirements
    - Recruit the best possible leadership and talent, and cultivate teamwork
    - Build community of stakeholders around shared values
    - Develop policies and procedures for effective performance
- Funding
    - Budget for sound stewardship of financial assets and business continuity
    - Establish internal controls to meet acceptable standards of accountability

- o Oversee trustworthy and comprehensible accounting and auditing
- o Raise money and manage cash flow effectively
- o Understand and capitalize the value of volunteer or in-kind support
- Operating
  - o Deliver quality goods and services aligned with mission
  - o Manage day-to-day operations efficiently
  - o Allocate and control resources with minimum waste
- Communicating
  - o Build trust through open communication with stakeholders and public
  - o Document successes and disappointments for future planning
  - o Share information internally and externally with high level of transparency
- Evaluating
  - o Evaluate performance periodically to identify strengths and weaknesses
  - o Assess stakeholders' needs to determine alignment with mission
  - o Identify core business competencies, risks, and competitive advantage

Leadership

Leadership is often the face of an organization, and sine qua non to a functioning organizational culture. Good leadership is considered by many to be the most important ingredient to achieving organizational effectiveness. In 2001, a team of researchers conducted a series of surveys to identify the characteristics of successful nonprofits discovering, "no matter how the answers are assembled, leadership always emerges as the starting point for the journey to high performance," (Light 2002).

While there is extensive writing on leadership, one concept among many—*servant leadership*—is particularly fitting for library associations. The approach of servant leadership as a means towards organizational effectiveness aims "to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them" (Greenleaf 2000). This model advances the values of stewardship, service, and professionalism, through an example of a leader whose first concern is to serve, secondly to lead. The focus is on the organization, its constituents, and a leader's role in serving as a good steward of the organization's resources, rather than an individual leader's personal characteristics, such as charisma.

The idea of servant leaders broadens the pool of talent from which to draw leaders, recognizing leadership potential from a spectrum of roles and styles as a regenerative force. In contrast to the popular model of personality-driven organizations, servant-led organizations focus on leveraging collaboration, organizational capacity, and teamwork. Results of the aforementioned 2001 survey suggest the servant-leadership approach is well established in high-performance nonprofits, reporting both study samples of top administrators from highly effective nonprofits and opinion leaders in organizational effectiveness were underwhelmed by the need for charismatic leaders. Both groups placed a higher value on the ability to collaborate with other organizations, raise funds to create a diverse financing portfolio (e.g., no more than 15% of annual funding coming

from any single source), and reflect on mission achievement and program results through outcomes-based evaluation (Light 2002). Leadership, although significant, is only part of the whole of effective organizations, and the servant leader's role is to create an environment where others can succeed to the fullness of their abilities towards the achievement of the mission across the organization and outward into the community.

Resilient Library Associations

Sustainability is *the* buzzword of the decade, whether the subject is climate change or the survival of a library association. In the context of this essay, the sustainability issue is based on a *going-concern assumption*, a concept appropriated from generally accepted accounting practices meaning a library association will be in operation long enough to carry out its current programmatic agenda. Optimistically speaking this could lead to a perpetual lifeline given programs change over time, or in a word, sustainability.

Nonprofit organizations are working earnestly to create sustainability models appropriate to their mission-driven enterprises with little useful guidance from the public or private sectors. Unlike their counterparts, nonprofits lack the authority to coerce support for activities under penalty of law or through levying taxes like governments, or the ability to attract financing by rewarding participation through distributing dividends on profitable returns like businesses. This results in a significant challenge of how to keep revenue streams flowing at a volume substantial enough to pay for operations on one hand, and support current programs—plus develop new ones—on the other.

One approach to answering the question of sustainability for library associations is presented by the conceptual framework for advancing *financial vibrancy*, which is a set of capacities an organization possesses to make the transition from one sustainable moment to the next. These capacities influence an organization's perspective about its work, enabling it to maneuver through periods of financial instability in an opportunistic and optimistic way (Struthers 2004). The ideas here are that change is the norm rather than the exception and financially vibrant nonprofits endure economic hardship through adaptability and creativity, hallmarks of what Salmon calls the "resilient sector" (2003).

The term financial vibrancy may be slightly misleading, since Struther's framework addresses more than just financial concerns. Developed after conducting a study of 60 highly effective nonprofit organizations, financial vibrancy is composed of six capacities that emerged as a common denominator for successful nonprofits:

1. To build relationships
2. For financial literacy
3. To plan and reflect in a meaningful way
4. To communicate
5. To envision and implement a sustainability model
6. To nurture participation

These six thematic areas focus on best practices in *resourcing*—activities that produce resources to support operations like fundraising, membership development, collaboration and resource sharing, and grantsmanship—that are needed to support an organization's core business functions. Struthers emphasizes a need to move beyond mere policies and procedures towards an articulation of mission throughout every aspect of business from accounting to planning. The alignment of mission with core business functions yields clarity and purpose for discovering the optimal resourcing solutions for a library association, ultimately shaping administration, collaboration, fund-raising, governance, and programs and services.

Fund-raising is the primus inter pares among resourcing activities, but financial resources are often restricted to specific programs with nothing allocated to cover overhead that could have benefits beyond the servicing of specific programs. Unfortunately both library associations and funders are frequently reluctant to allocate spending for anything not directly program-related, for example "soft-money" projects with no amount granted for indirect costs.

Soft-money projects without funding for overhead costs deplete resources from operations to satisfy short-term contractual agreements, with long-term negative effects on the organizations sustainability. Goodwill—expertise and reputation for example—generated by successful projects could benefit the organization in the future, although difficult to realize without performance evaluations to link project results with future inputs. The financial vibrancy framework warrants a holistic approach to the resourcing challenge, recommending library associations build bridges across discreet business activities to build organizational capacity as a unified effort.

Building Capacity

"Organizational capacity encompasses virtually everything an organization uses to achieve its mission, from desks and chairs to programs and people" (Light 2004). Businesses increase capacity through acquiring other firms, borrowing money, and issuing common stock, while governments raise taxes, issue contracts, and create new or merge existing administrations. While some best practices from the worlds of business and government transfer to nonprofits, there are aspects of being "nonprofit-like" that limit the application of business models from other sectors.

The question is how can library associations and other nonprofits increase organizational effectiveness in synch with their nature? A 2003 report culminating from several surveys and case studies on nonprofit performance cites a substantial number of nonprofits are engaged in some kind of capacity building—basic efforts to increase, replenish, or improve organizational capacity. These exemplars investments in capacity building underscore the importance of capacity building in achieving organization effectiveness. Unfortunately there is little guidance for library associations on how to begin capacity building. A good place start is by looking for highly effective library associations or other examples of high performance from the nonprofit sector. The trick is finding good models that closely match in mission, operations, programs, services, and size, and in the

likely absence of a perfect match, appropriate bits and pieces that address specific business functions.

The good news is there is more generalized guidance from the nonprofit sector. Two nonprofit organizations have attempted to set standards of excellence for nonprofit organizations through defining characteristics of highly performing nonprofits, i.e., the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations and the Minnesota Council for Nonprofits. While impossible for many library associations to meet every standard outlined by either group given the expense of time and money, the standards provide a conceptual starting point for self-assessment and setting goals. Selecting a la carte from the menu of standards will allow a focused approach to identifying areas in immediate need of nourishment within the scope of available resources to achieve desired outcomes.

Reforming organizations is not trivial, requiring investments of time and money throughout planning, implementation, and assessment. Investing in capacity building doesn't often yield a quick payoff of intended results, or may result in unintended outcomes such as resistance from staff to change.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and outcomes can be difficult to measure. Nonetheless, studies reveal a direct link between organizational capacity and organizational effectiveness, and report that even small efforts to improve are beneficial to organizations in the long run (Light 2004).

Conclusion

Library associations stretch the boundaries of the possible everyday, as they accept the challenges to fulfill their missions with higher standards of effectiveness. Their symbiotic relationship with libraries is a vital part of society, animating the potential of individual action towards the goal of a greater common good. To sustain this vitality, library associations require care and nourishment for the mutual benefit of their own organizations, libraries, and library users. Sustainability can only be achieved through some form of organizational development.

Although in an informal and ad hoc manner, many library associations support organizational development by responding to crises or opportunities, e.g., working to fix budget shortfalls or adding new grant-funded projects, respectively. A more formal approach supported by some effort to build consensus among stakeholders—board members, member libraries, staff—matched with adequate allocations of planning, staffing, evaluation, and possibly funding, minimizes the risks to realizing when organizational development happens and leveraging the long-range benefits to the organization. The good news is evidence supports the assertion that investing in organizational development through capacity building does pay off over time. The bad news is organizations often neglect or resist making these investments due to a focus on the short-term goals of supporting day-to-day operations and program-oriented tasks (Light 2004).

As the saying goes, if library associations continue to do more with less, they'll soon run out of less. Investing in organization development as a strategic decision is the answer to extending an organizations lifeline. Without it, a library association risks depleting the regenerative forces of its resourcing practices at a rate that exceeds the ability to support core business functions and deliver programs and services. Leadership, while important, is only place to start when beginning a campaign to build capacity in a strategic, rather than reactive, way. Building capacity in concert with board members, constituents, consultants, funders, and other organizations can reverse the downward spiral, invigorating an organization to move forward in a positive direction towards sustainability.

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