



**It takes courage to make mistakes - how to get the staff involved in making the future libraries**

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**Abstract:**

*Rethinking libraries is the most important thing to do for a library director right now. Doing it with the staff is inspiring and fun. It is impossible to plan everything ahead on a detailed level. A management group has to decide the direction where library activities are going, but not necessarily how to get there. To get the staff involved means talking about where we are going, why we are going to this direction and what happens to each individual. The most significant new value of our library is courage. Courage means challenging ourselves. Making mistakes is really important for learning in our libraries. You have to allow people to make mistakes and learn from them and take responsibility for the mistakes made.*

Rethinking libraries is the most important thing to do for a library director right now. And doing it with the staff is inspiring and fun. Today I am going to tell you how we do it in Espoo City Library.

Espoo City Library has four regional libraries, ten branches and two book mobiles. Espoo City Library is one of the four HelMet Libraries. HelMet- Libraries operate in the metropolitan area of Finland. Of Finland's 5,4 million people almost every fifth lives in the metropolitan area. There are altogether 36 library service points in the area. HelMet Libraries have a circulation of 17 million visitors a year. There are 11 million walk-in visitors and 9 million web visits. 800 staff members are working in HelMet Libraries, 200 of them in Espoo City Library.

Libraries environment is changing all the time and that makes it very challenging to lead a library. Nowadays it is impossible to plan ahead everything in detailed level for several years to come. I believe that a management group of a library has to decide the direction where library activities are going, but not necessarily how to get there. The steps to the goal should be planned with the staff and customers.

To get the staff involved means talking, talking and more talking about where we are going, why we are going to this direction and what happens to each individual. Sometimes big changes are necessary, but in many cases small changes are easier to carry into effect. Nowadays we have excellent means for discussions with the staff and customers. In Espoo we have had both face to face staff forums and news groups for the staff several years. There are staff meetings only for a certain library, only for certain type of staff or open for all the staff. On those forums it is extremely important that they are confidential. For the first thing in each session we agree that everything spoken in the session stays there. That allows people to criticize openly without fear. Because in every state of change the first and last question is: "What will happen to me?"

Social media is also a useful tool to talk with people. What makes it challenging is that social media mixes the roles of both employees and bosses. The power distance issue is more complex there. I believe that generally the power distance between directors and employees is becoming shorter. Social media is an easy way to increase communication. I think it is important to encourage people to use it even when one doesn't yet know how. If an organization delivers guidelines for the use of social media, it is better to concentrate on encouraging people rather than giving too many warnings.

One approach we have chosen at this turning point was to change our values to new ones. The most significant new value of our library is courage. I am wondering if safety has been the hidden value of many libraries. For years library work has been rather static and perhaps people who like a static world have found their ways to libraries. The public image of library has been quiet and invisible. Now it is time to change that and it requires courage. Courage means looking for the future instead of the present. What makes it hard is that innovation means inappropriate and dangerous ideas. It means taking sides and having argues. It means to be criticized by your colleagues.

Last year in Espoo during Ramadan we offered a place for prayers. It was not only for Muslims, but still there was a huge debate of whether we did a wrong thing. This may sound odd since there are this kind of silent places for example on university campuses all over Europe. Still many thought it was inappropriate for a library. The same goes with political debates. Some people think that politics don't belong to libraries. But if libraries want to stand for democracy, we should allow politics to perform in libraries and tell people how they would change things. Courage means challenging ourselves. It means seeing things from different viewpoints and not seeing things either black or white.

Especially in big organizations like the City of Espoo courage means also fighting against bureaucracy in order to have time for more important things. If you write every report you are demanded for, if you attend every meeting you are invited in or if you obey every rule you are given, you just won't have time for thinking about the future and making the future with your staff. Courage means doing what you need to do, not only what you expected to do.

Making mistakes is really important for learning in our libraries. Being director means delegating tasks to people also when you are not one hundred per cent sure that the other person can perform the task. You have to allow people to make mistakes and learn from them and take responsibility for the mistakes made. And of course the boss has to stand up for the staff no matter what.

For me one of the hardest things was to tell publicly about my own mistakes. Nowadays I do it all the time and I have realized that it is extremely important that managers tell about their mistakes in order to show that everyone who is doing something makes mistakes. This creates an atmosphere where it is easy to admit that one was wrong. And to move on to the next duty.

Rethinking libraries with the staff is fun, but doing it with customers is really inspiring. In Espoo we started a thing called customer councils a couple of years ago. Last year we had nearly twenty of them. Some of them concentrated on children or senior citizen services, some of them on services provided by a small branch. They are great opportunities to hear what people expect of library services. It is easy to say that customers always want more books and more opening hours, but that is not the case. They have a lot of ideas to carry out from Dog Sundays to Japanese collections. And many of them are willing to work with us to provide those services. Right now we have co-operation with an acoustic expert who has made us plans for better acoustics to our performing stages.

Not every library in a city should look the same. This spring we have made profiles for our libraries and also published them. To have a public profile for a library makes it visible that equality does not mean same services for everyone. It means that we should provide services according to the needs of the citizen of that specific neighbourhood. I think libraries have done this for years, but we have not talked about it with the customers.

In conclusion I would like to recommend that we will not take ourselves so seriously all the time. Making mistakes belongs to life even in libraries. We are so used to being accurate and precise that we sometimes forget to have fun. Rethinking the library with the staff is and should be a fun and ongoing process which never stops.

For proving my point I will show you a video clip where one of our librarians tells how we change library services in Sello Library.

Sello Library is the most frequented public library within the Helsinki Metropolitan area. It is open seven days a week. The library has two floors: the ground floor designed as a library of events and the first floor as a classical library.

The library of events means a space where all kinds of interactive cultural events can take place. The entrance hall is a living room, and there is a stage there. On the ground floor there are sections for children and young adults' services, as well as the music section, films, newspapers and magazines.

The classical library provides literature and culture for adults. Clubs and groups of people get together there. The themes can vary from politics to crocheting. Learning and studying are an essential part of the service.

***(VIDEO CLIP PRESENTATION)***