

ARSL presentation notes, Sept. 2018
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Good morning and thank you for being here. What I plan to offer today is part case study, part cheerleading session, and part how-to.

Every library is different and has a unique set of challenges, but I believe that our small and rural libraries can offer the same or better quality service than large urban or suburban libraries. After all, we know our patrons and the needs of our communities better than anyone else.

I've got some organizational tools and practical suggestions to help you figure out what you need to fix, how to prioritize the projects, and what it takes to get it done, all on little to no budget.

I made a lot of changes in my first year on the job, though it took through the second year and into the third to see real change. I started in late July of 2016, and from April 2016 to April 2017, the library's circulation and door count doubled. Three years in and these numbers continue to grow -- circulation pretty dramatically and door count more moderate but steady.

I weeded almost 20,000 items, rearranged all the materials and furniture, created a flexible space community room, wrote a policy manual, applied for and got a grant for a new ILS, solicited donations and installed new lighting in the community room, hired new staff to replace those lost to attrition, started keeping stats, bought materials that patrons wanted, started offering programs for children and adults, healed a broken relationship with the Friends, started reporting to my governing body monthly, reached out to potential partners in the community, joined the only service organization in town, started to cover book jackets and properly prepare materials for cataloging and shelving, started a summer reading program, fixed thousands of incorrect catalog records and spine labels, bought a printer for spine labels and moved the electric typewriter to circulate in our Library of Things, began contacting patrons about overdue books, installed a filter on the children's computer, installed time management and partition software on the public computers -- and a bunch of other stuff.

In short, I turned it into a functioning library instead of a book museum and unlicensed child-care center.

I'm going to share with you a decision matrix and a rough outline of how to approach a big project that may have lots of facets -- but they are all connected because they all are in or about your library. You can and should adapt these processes to make them work for you!

First slide:

What: Problem and Desired outcome

Who: will it help? Will it hurt?

Where: (move/rearrange)

When: deadline. Why that date? Timed to an event?

How will we accomplish the project?

How much staff is involved?

How many volunteers will be needed?

How will library operations be affected?

How much will it cost? How will I pay for it?/Where are funds coming from?

How much time will it take?

Pros

Cons

How will I measure results?

Stats and anecdotal evidence

What I faced three years ago was a series of problem-solving events. Now, I'm not going to tell you that everything I did was a success -- but, at the very least, you can learn from my mistakes.

Identify problem or problems

Gather information

Do research

Use your ILS stats

Synthesize the data

Share with your board or governing body

Gather feedback and add to your analysis

Seek solutions

Follow best practices

What's the best way to eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

Don't worry if you've never been a library director or even worked in a library. I had a couple of years of experience working in a university library, first as a graduate assistant

in the combined reference desk/computer help desk and then in the circulation department managing student workers, among other duties.

Upon reflection, I can say that I think my “outsider” status helped me in several ways. I was new, and open-minded patrons, the judge and county commissioners, and the Friends of the library expected improvements, even if they didn’t always realize that improvements mean CHANGE.

Be warned:

Most patrons hate change.

Most staff fear change.

You will be blindsided by criticism or complaints, seemingly out of the blue. It may or may not be a timely attack -- you could think that you were done and, all of a sudden, you’ll be dealing with an unhappy patron. Do not take it personally! This may be the hardest part.

But you, my friends, MUST embrace change. But only when the change is for the better.

Warning: it’s not easy, and it’s not fast. We spent about eight months weeding the collection of about 15,000 items, and thousands of uncatalogued items such as “decorative” sets of encyclopedias, “decorative” stacks of old law books, “decorative” old periodicals, “decorative” government publications, and on and on, ad nauseum. Are you starting to see a theme here?

If you don’t have 1,001 problems to solve, you may suspect that something is ... not quite right ... at your library.

How do you know?

- Your circulation is in decline
- Your door count is in decline
- Your programs are not attracting new patrons
- Nothing has changed in years
- YOUR GUT tells you something ain’t right.

Find your state library’s standards for public libraries and their minimum criteria for accreditation -- even if you THINK you know them. Print them out and put them on a

clipboard that you can carry around with you, mark up with notes, check off, and -- mostly -- serve as a physical reminder of what needs to be done.

Library standards and minimum criteria for accreditation are two different things in Texas, but both are critical.

The standards document includes minimum standards, enhanced standards, and exemplary standards. Nobody just wants to squeak by! Go for the gold!

If you can't find them on the state library's website, call a consultant and ask. If your state doesn't have them, use the ones from Texas. They are pretty good and I promise you will not be required to wear cowboy boots or have a longhorn steer tied up out front.

Ours is followed by a "local implementation checklist" with the categories: achieved, working on, not yet begun, and not applicable. I reported every month on my progress. My library started at about 20 achieved out of 136 or so. Some months we'd meet 10 or more. By the time I filled out the forms for accreditation after my first year, we met all that were applicable.

Also, read the state laws related to libraries. I did this on my first day and was surprised to learn a few things, like it's illegal to charge for any library programs in Texas. Also, it's illegal to view porn on public computers. Some of your state's laws may conflict with the tenets of the profession and the standards set by the ALA.

Be prepared to answer stakeholder questions and have back-up materials. I was able to overcome some objections to decisions I made just by giving brief, factual answers and offering handouts.

If you're weeding, and you should always be weeding as a matter of course per CREW standards (another Best Practice from Texas), look for the FAQ page from Better World Books and edit it to fit your needs.

I handed out maybe 40 or 50 copies of this to patrons, in addition to sending a media release to the local newspaper (it was printed), writing an explanation in the library's monthly newspaper, and providing complete reports and information to the county commissioners (my oversight board) and the board of directors of the Friends group.

PARTICIPATE by participating in all your processes as a patron, starting with walking in the door, finding materials, asking a reference question, going to the restroom, signing

up for a library card, registering and/or attending a program, ordering an interlibrary loan, sitting in all the different kinds of seating you offer, viewing your website as a patron, and reading all the signs -- except realize that your patrons probably are NOT reading signs.

Notice where you have electrical outlets. Bring a pen and pad to take notes, and a tape measure. Pay attention to sight lines. My library used to have comfy reading chairs so close to the bookshelves that you couldn't look at books without having your rear end right in the face of the person sitting and reading. Or there were giant ficus trees blocking entire sections of nonfiction.

Then do this with as many people who will tolerate this exercise and who will give you honest feedback: a staff member, a board member, a regular volunteer. Make notes of your impressions and those of your helper. Do nothing with that information right away. Unless the bathroom is dirty. But don't change anything.

Read and learn your policy manual. You will probably need to rewrite it or at least update it. Print out a copy that you can mark up. ARSL has just posted a small library policies best-practices document. Go online and read the policy manuals of as many neighboring libraries as you can, especially if your patrons are using them, too.

Have your staff, if you have any, train you to do their jobs, even if you trained them to begin with. Don't try to correct them -- at this point. Just take notes.

An organization is an organism, and it's only as strong as its weakest link or element. Find the pressure points and make a list.

Then repeat the exercise, but look at the physical plant and the mechanical processes. Bring a notebook and your phone or camera to take pictures. Photos will reveal things that you have become so accustomed to that you don't notice them anymore. Carpet stains, a crack, a bedragged door sweep. Make a running inventory of the condition of everything from doors and windows to the A/C and if the toilets run after you flush them. Even if you don't have to do much or anything, because you have a relatively new building and not an 1872 former general store and lumberyard, keep this inventory.

Skills that came in handy: ability to process a lot of information quickly and spitting out a synopsis in plain English. Also, research. Knowing where to look for information, and where and when to ask it. All things that librarians are good at.

To wrap up:

Gather information

Do nothing.

Listen.

Observe processes but keep your mouth shut, unless it's to ask a relevant question. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it ain't broke, be suspicious and find out why. Dig a little deeper if things seem OK on the surface.

Keep asking why. Be able to answer it -- and convincingly -- about any change you make.

Count the number of steps it takes to do things. Try to eliminate the unnecessary ones.

If you are moving furniture, sit in the space with a pad and a tape measure. Think it through. Use your imagination. Make sure walkways and aisles are at least 36 inches wide, preferably more. Follow movers around with a tape measure.

When you are talking with patrons or staff about any future potential changes, listen and take notes. Don't make any promises other than you'll listen and consider.

Pick your fights carefully -- with your board, friends, etc. You are always better off waiting and gathering more information.

Start making a list of to-dos, or build a matrix. Don't share it yet, until you have to. When you present your list to the board, make sure that you wouldn't be embarrassed if it ended up on the front page of the local newspaper. Don't release it until it's polished and you can handle most any question. Make sure your whys are on there and justified.

Put out a suggestion box if you don't already have one. It's good PR even if you don't get usable suggestions.

Accept that you are not going to make everyone happy, but you can make the library function better, be more welcoming, and make it easier for patrons to find and use the resources they need. Patrons may resist change, or at least the idea of change, but if the library is more comfortable and easy to use, they will come in more often and use it. Let's hear your questions and problems -- or horror stories -- and we'll brainstorm ways to help. What would you do if money, time, and staff were not limited?