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Public library stakeholders vested interests/potential conflicts: a case study

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholders are defined as anyone with a vested interest in the library. While all stakeholders may support library services, conflicts often arise between the library and its stakeholders, as well as between and among stakeholders, due to diverging goals and objectives and changing circumstances. Because most stakeholders are outside of a library manager's control (excluding staff), some managers underestimate and overlook the value of library stakeholders. Thus, a potentially valuable ally, or more dangerously, someone who might be a key adversary in accomplishing the library's mission and goals, may not be recognized. It is because of the potential significance of stakeholders in helping or hindering the implementation of library policies, goals, and decisions, that this author offers a simple descriptive model for identifying library stakeholders, their interests, and potential conflicts. A case study of a US public library in conflict with some key stakeholder interests illustrates the proposed model.

INTRODUCTION

Managers of all libraries interact at varying degrees of obligation with individuals and organizations who have vested interests in the library. These individuals and organizations are commonly referred to as stakeholders.

Because most stakeholders are outside of a library manager's control (excluding staff), some

managers underestimate and overlook the value of library stakeholders. Thus, a potentially valuable ally, or more dangerously someone who might be a key adversary in accomplishing the library's mission and goals, may not be recognized.

It is because of the potential significance of stakeholders in helping or hindering the implementation of library policies, goals, and decisions, that this article focuses on the value of identifying library stakeholders and their interests, a topic that is often ignored by librarians. This article will first discuss the concept of library stakeholders in general, for different types of libraries. After the conceptual discussion, the article will examine the impact of library stakeholders in a U.S. public library setting, and the conflicts that occurred.

CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION OF LIBRARY STAKEHOLDERS

1. Who are the Stakeholders?

In the broadest sense, a stakeholder is defined as anyone with a relationship with an organization. In marketing literature, stakeholders are sometimes called publics. For the public library, by virtue of funding and mandate for equitable service, everyone in the community the library serves has a potential interest in the library's collection, operations, image and financial health. It is one of the institutional strengths of the library that the people and entities in the market area generally support the concept of the library, whether or not they are active or potential customers, and believe that it serves a socially desirable purpose.¹ For academic libraries, stakeholders include the student and faculty at the academy as well as the academy's top-level administrators, at a minimum. For a corporate library, the stakeholders could include, the employees of the corporation, and the top-level management.

That social desirability of libraries, however, reflects a great diversity of attitudes, personal interests and motives in the market-library interaction whether it is an active or passive interface. The complexity greatly complicates successful policy formulation for the library as any experienced librarian can attest. There is a great diversity of legitimate interest in library matters that may be found in a community college or a corporate environment. Library management tailors the general model to represent the current situation. The clusters of interests may be categorized broadly such as users, staff, supplier, active supporter, competitor, governmental influence and public at large. Within each category of course, there may be a wide range of attitudes. A single individual may hold multiple stakeholder views. For example, in a public library environment, an individual's interest may incorporate roles as a user, parent of user, member of a special interest group or groups, and taxpayer.

2. When and How are Stakeholders Identified?

If the library stakeholders are not identified and categorized, this puts the library at risk as it is difficult to predict when having such a list might be critical to the library's operation. Not all stakeholders will be aware of having any active interest in the library but they may have a situational one (i.e., a sympathetic politician or administrator who has the ability to sway opinions favorably towards the library, or an activist that supports equitable public service and

¹ "Strategic Marketing of Library Services," unpublished continuing education series for American Libraries, 1989, co-author, Professor Emeritus, Persis E. Rockwood.

fight against closure of a library facility.) Also, there may be times when it is beneficial to identify individuals or organizations who may look unfavorably upon the library or its pending policies.

Generic stakeholder categories (i.e., users, competitors) are useful for identifying clusters of interest. The optimal list is community-specific and based upon librarians' knowledge of individuals and groups with known and vested interests in library services (i.e. users, Southeast branch; competitor for local funds, college library.) This ready reference list of stakeholders and individual names, (i.e. Jim Jones, head college librarian) are critical for use to facilitate feedback when evaluating present and future library services, considering additions or elimination of library programs, developing advocacy campaigns and assessing the library's image in the community. Staff can participate with library management to gather and offer stakeholder names of individuals and entities, prior to any event or emergency need. The list should be available and reviewed on an annual basis at a minimum. The list can be redefined at needed junctures or to identify the new stakeholders and changing interests. Over time library management can better understand trends of changing interests in the library, over time.

3. What are Stakeholder Interests and How do These Change?

Stakeholder interests are based upon what benefit is desired from their relationship with the library. For example, a taxpayer wants their dollars to pay for convenient and cost effective services. A corporate president desires for the library's intranet to communicate company policies. Funders may have a vested political interest in library facility planning, to gain the support of certain segments of constituents. Stakeholder interests also can shift as outside factors impact the community. All public libraries reside within changing external environments. These environmental impacts include:

- changes in demographic (e.g. increase in Hispanic children or freshman class);
- economic (e.g., decrease in general revenue funds for library building);
- public policies (fees initiated for non-resident or off-campus library use);
- technological (e.g., Internet filtering for computers);
- competitive (public agencies or other departments vying for same dollars).

It is important for library management to be aware of the unique and changing characteristics of the library's environment not only to assure that the library is responsive to the community and aware of those factors that affect the future and vitality of the library, but also to anticipate changing interests of stakeholders.

4. What are the Conflicts?

The interests or pertinent goals of major types of stakeholders in the library, have some points of intersection of interest with other stakeholders and consequently policy implications for the library. While all stakeholders may support library services, conflicts often arise between the library and its stakeholders, as well as between and among stakeholders, due to diverging goals and objectives and changing circumstances.

The information developed in this way is useful in prioritizing services to be offered among markets and services, allocating resources, identifying potential needs for service, and proactively managing crises that may occur. It is important for the library to formally identify stakeholders, assess changing interests, and anticipate possible conflicts.

5. Strategies for Utilizing Stakeholders

Stakeholders can be library partners in helping affect and realize library decisions and policies. Some examples of how library stakeholders can be utilized include:

- a) Being the vanguard (i.e., forefront) in trying out new library collections or technologies. Their impressions can market new library development to other library users, helping ensure future success.
- b) Helping sway public or administrative opinions in ways that strategically support library management;
- c) Providing a broader picture of the issues and potential opposition that the library manager will face in implementing a particular library plan.

To further illustrate the value of identifying stakeholders for the library, a case study is offered. The library's real-life stakeholders their interests and the real conflicts that occurred come into play when a joint public community college library was suggested by local funders and key stakeholders. The value of a library being in a proactive position to anticipate these conflicts can not be underestimated

II. STAKEHOLDER CASE STUDY: Osceola County Library²

Before examining the potential role of library stakeholders in any library decisionmaking process, it is important to understand the background and external environment in which the library resides. Only then can a library manager know how to optimally utilize the potential value of library stakeholders. Therefore, a brief background and description of Osceola County and the Osceola County Library is provided before reviewing more specific stakeholder details for this case study.

1. Background

The Osceola County Public Library is a relatively young library established in 1989, previously relying on reciprocal relationships with neighboring counties for staff and resources. The library has a central facility, four branches and two outreach centers placed in new schools in areas of high growth. The library accrued 7 million dollars from a designated millage, over the past 14 years. None of the funds have been used for capital expansion, (other funds were used for the branch buildings.) Little maintenance has been needed. The county commission, aware of the 7 million dollars available for library services wants to utilize 5 million of the funds to build a joint public community college library on the campus of the new college. This facility will enable the college to gain matching funds for a fourth building.

² This case study is based upon the unpublished master facility plan authored by principals, Dr. Christie Koontz and Dean K. Jue, GeoLib Program, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA 32306, www.geolib.org.

While the college and the library share many stakeholders, the conflicts that occur over this possible decision illustrate how external environmental impacts change stakeholder priorities, subsequently creating conflict amongst and between stakeholders, and the library.

2. External Environmental Impacts on the Osceola County Library

As discussed earlier, all public libraries reside within changing external environments. Some of the major changes in the county that impacted the Osceola County Library, (Florida, US) include:

Osceola County is continuing to experience tremendous economic growth. The central region will be the fastest growing employment center in Florida, through the year 2007. The leading employers in the county remain in the retail trade and services. The business development community in the county is continuing to focus on attracting industry and business that will diversify and raise the quality of the county's overall job base.

Osceola County grew 60.1% in population from 1990 to 2000, over twice that of Florida's overall growth rate (from 107,728 individuals in 1990 to 172,493 in 2000).

The median income is \$38,214, and 79.1% of the population over 25 years of age has a high school diploma, with 15.7% with a bachelor's degree or higher.

By 2000, Osceola County was 77% white, closely mirroring Florida's average of 78% white. Although the county's percentage of African American persons is only 7.4%, compared to Florida's average of 14.6%, the percentage has still increased from the 1990 percentage of less than 5.5%. The Hispanic population increased from 12% to 24.17%.

The growth is excellent for the county, but in the recent difficult economic times which most locales in the US are experiencing, there are not enough public dollars to expand all the public services needed to keep up with the county's burgeoning and diverse populations. Therefore, the library's funds are looked upon as a resource to make up for growing deficits in other public agency accounts.

3. Library's Proactive Reaction

The library manager realizes the library funds are in jeopardy and also is cognizant of burgeoning population and unmet service needs around the county. Since the library is relatively young, there was no master plan in place, identifying future needs, i.e., how those funds might be spent to meet library service needs in the next ten years. The director initiated development of the plan. The first phase of the plan³ is to interview key stakeholders and facilitate feedback on current and future library services. Such a list had not previously been developed. The library manager met with staff and hired consultants to develop a list of critical stakeholders at this juncture. Personal names were of course identified for setting up interviews and focus groups. For purposes of this article the inclusion of names is not necessary

³ A library master plan has two other major phases of population data analysis, identification of gaps in service, and identification of future service and facility needs. These phases are outside the scope of this paper.

A. How were the Library Stakeholders Identified?

Since the library did not have a list of key stakeholders developed, there was a reliance upon the experience and training of staff and the consultants. The generic clusters were initially used to begin to identify broad groups including: county commissioners, departments and key staff; key private sector business development entities such as Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Bureaus; bordering county libraries with reciprocal relationships; community college administrators and staff; public library staff; and key citizens and volunteers. This list was finalized at around 60 personal interviews, and eight focus groups held around the county to elicit feedback on the current and future of the library. The issue of the possibility of depletion of the library funds began to alter the vested interests of some of the stakeholders, and the basis of conflict formed.

B. What were the Stakeholders Interests and How did they Change?

As discussed earlier the library had enjoyed an amicable relationship with most stakeholders aforementioned. There was shared interest by most in having and maintaining a formal county library system. Because the library had its own designated funding there had been little need for the library or other public agencies to compete for public funds. While reciprocal relationships still played a part, by and large the library was independent and had no financial worries up until the county began to grow, and parallel to that, coffers began to decline with the down turn in economy. The large amassed funds that the library had were looked upon by a growing number of stakeholders in the private and business development sector, as a soon to be shared county resources. Thus was the beginning of changing interests and subsequent conflicts.

C. What were the Conflicts in Osceola County

Those stakeholders who had the most to gain (private sector business development interests and the college) and those who had the most to lose (unserved library markets and the library) were in greatest conflict. For example, the volunteer citizen group that started a library in a city-owned owned building had hopes of a permanent facility. The low income areas that had once had minimal library service could see the depletion of the funds as eliminating any hope of even a storefront facility or bookmobile service (currently there is no bookmobile.) The private sector and the college could not build the fourth facility and have hopes of expanding to a four year institution. The private sector believed that the new joint facility would increase the number of library visits, while the library wanted to increased the number of library users. The library director and staff could foresee not only elimination of new services, but reduced funding for upcoming maintenance, remodeling, and much needed new staff for burgeoning and diverse populations. See Figure 1 for a review of the identified stakeholder, interests and potential conflicts.

Figure 1. Osceola County Library Stakeholders and Conflicts with Library’s Interests

Stake Holder	Stakeholders’ Interest	Potential Conflict
County Taxpayers	Accessibility to all Pride in facility Extensive services	Cost to taxpayers Reduced maintenance \$\$ Number of services offered
Users	Quality and variety of materials Convenient hours	Materials unavailable Services unavailable Desire for longer hours
Potential Users	New facilities for unserved areas Perceived size and quality of collection	Desire for services and materials which are unavailable Collection decisions
Library Staff	Professionalism/pride Innovation Job satisfaction Public service	Difficult customers Job dissatisfaction Compensation Work schedule
Advisory Board	Increased services Increased use Increased registration Increased funding	Personnel decisions Allocation of resources Hours and services
Volunteer Library Staff	Permanent locations Permanent collection Qualified staff Permanent funding	Limited resources Limited funds for new facilities and staffs Depletion of funds
College Library Staff	Permanent library building on campus	Public library’s mission Limited funds for library building
Funding Agencies	Political benefit Constituent support	Costs Library’s mission Public or political support
Media	Controversial news Long time support for key proponents	Loyalty to key county interests Fact-based library budget information

The library was in the middle of the largest and most widespread system of conflicts within its

short history. The library director began to utilize the stakeholder list and knowledge of the vested interests and conflicts, to develop strategies for dealing with funders.

D. Strategies for Utilizing the Osceola County Library Stakeholders by Osceola County Library Administrators

The library director having identified key citizen stakeholders with influence, began to communicate the library's soon-to-be financial plight. Through his attendance at the focus groups, and personal communication with the now identified stakeholders, the director enacted a word of mouth campaign by which the plight of the library was communicated in a non-threatening and non-public manner. The knowledge that large populations of the county would go unserved was communicated widely. While the private sector interests had stronger backing on the county commission, the broad-based support for library services was strengthened by the use of networking and communicating with the key stakeholders. At the first county commission meeting, key stakeholders attended including: the volunteer library representatives; citizens from lower income neighborhoods, the community college librarians; key staff, i.e., the new bookmobile librarian and the bi-lingual senior librarian, and county staff who could verify the library's financial situation.

Summary

While many libraries identify stakeholders in times of crisis, this author stresses the need to take this descriptive activity to the next level. The optimal process entails identification of stakeholders and their interests prior to events and crises, and thoughtfully anticipating potential conflicts that may occur with library interests. Such a model allows the library to foster stakeholder relationships in times of non-conflict, thereby enhancing the proactive nature of library management when real life conflicts occur.