

The Female Public Library Director and Her Governing Board

Dale W. Gaddis

How do female administrators fare with governing boards? What are the disadvantages of being a female administrator competing for adequate funding and recognition for a growing and vital organization? Are there ways to overcome the problem of being a woman in this environment?

Personally, I do not like to think in terms of gender differences, but prefer to think in terms of individual differences and the strengths and weaknesses of a particular individual in a given situation. Perhaps I fear that talking about what I perceive as gender differences will encourage the persistence of stereotyping all men and women according to these perceived differences. It seems to me that all situations and administrators are different and success in a given situation is not dependent on whether one is male or female. Rather, it depends on how well one understands the situation; one's own weaknesses and strengths in dealing with the situation; and on how well one utilizes the strengths of others to supplement one's own strengths, and compensate for one's weaknesses.

Upon examining certain facts relating to North Carolina public libraries, one begins to suspect, however, that there are disadvantages in being a female director of a public library. Forty of the seventy-two state funded public library systems are directed by women. Only two of these directors are among the ten highest paid directors in the state and only five are among the twenty highest paid. If one ranks libraries by the population served, again only two of the top ten libraries are directed by women. Ranked according to size of budget, only one library among the top ten is directed by a woman. On the other hand, if the libraries are ranked according to per capita operating support, seven of the top ten are directed by women.

What does all of this mean? Without further research one can only suppose why so few women direct the large systems. It is relatively clear that because women are not in these jobs, they therefore do not command the higher salaries paid by

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those systems. The high per capita support for libraries directed by women may indicate that women are effective at developing support for their libraries and do not have (or they are able to overcome) the disadvantages they often are presumed to have in that effort.

What are these presumed disadvantages?

Generally speaking, women are often presumed by themselves as well as by their governing boards, superiors, and colleagues not to be as competent as men in financial and technical areas.

Women are smaller physically, and generally do not have a commanding presence. They are often presumed to be soft, easily cowed, and not make a fuss if not given what they request.

Women are thought to be emotional, not logical, reasonable. Men generally are presumed uncomfortable dealing with women as equals. Consequently, as women have entered the traditional male strongholds in business and management, they have had difficulty breaking into the communication networks developed by men when women were the extreme minority in these fields.

Women's work traditionally has not been valued as highly as men's. "Women can get by for less, because there is someone else supporting them" has, until recently, been the excuse.

When I was selected to replace George Linder as director of the Durham County Library, I had some real fears that I would not be able to maintain support for the library, both because I was a woman and because of my particular personality which I felt would work against me in my efforts to maintain that support. George Linder was a real fighter for the library; he attacked library support issues as if he were going into battle. I knew that I could not work that way; my personality and talents would not support that approach. But I was not sure that my approach would be successful, and even had the fear that perhaps I was being selected by the County Manager for the position because he knew I would not fight in the same way and because he felt that he could control me.

With regard to the supposed disadvantages of being a woman, I knew I was competent in

financial and technical areas. One advantage I had always had growing up was good aptitude in mathematics and logic. From my years in elementary school, I can remember enjoying competing (particularly with boys) to win math contests or to receive the highest grades in the class. Although I did not pursue a technical education, I have always felt myself competent to understand the technical aspects of a problem. The only problem I have encountered is that women are not assumed to have this competency, so it is necessary to demonstrate it or get an accepted authority to confirm it. Men on the other hand are often not required to demonstrate their competence, although in many cases, I have found that they should be.

I am short. I am quiet. I am noncombative. To fight successfully for the library, I must compensate for these feminine characteristics or learn to use them to my advantage.

I have found that the avenues for communication with male colleagues and superiors are not as open to women as they are to other men. A business lunch or breakfast seems to be much more possible when the participants are of the same sex. Poker games are great times for establishing rapport if one wishes to become one of the boys but I just cannot bring myself to do that. The most prestigious and powerful civic clubs in Durham have persisted as dictated from the national level in excluding women from their membership rolls. This is perhaps the biggest disadvantage I have found in being a female administrator of a significant community organization. In Durham, most male County department heads and male heads of cultural and educational organizations belong to Rotary or Kiwanis Clubs, as do the influential male business leaders of the community. By not being able to belong, not only are my contacts not as easily established but the library does not have the visibility with business leaders that it otherwise might. My predecessor is still active in Kiwanis and maintains the library's high profile there. When he first retired, he tried to get male librarians on the staff to join the club to maintain the continuity of support that Kiwanis had provided over the years. To put it bluntly, this galled the heck out of me.

Fortunately, in Durham, I have not encountered the undervaluing of women's work that often occurs elsewhere. George Linder set the stage for higher salaries for the library director and for library employees generally. He demanded a high salary (for the time) when he came to Durham, and this salary was maintained by him through a County reclassification and salary

study done in the early 70's. Throughout his career, he fought hard for librarians' salaries. Because of my longevity with Durham County, I was able to maintain the salary level for the director's position when I came into the position. By the time a new reclassification study was done in 1985, comparable worth and pay equity had become issues so that the new classification for the library director's position was put on a par with the County's finance director. We have recently had a merit pay plan put into effect, with the prospect of future across the board raises fading out of existence. Although future raises are to be based on an objective rating system, subjective judgment does enter into the awarding of the raises. It will be interesting to watch to see what effect if any this process will have on pay equity.

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How can one maintain support for one's organization in spite of the disadvantages of being female? Rosabeth Moss Kantor in her book, *Men and Women In The Corporation*, claims that power is an important factor in achieving managerial success. She defines power as "the ability to get things done, to mobilize resources, to get and use whatever it is that a person needs for the goals he or she is attempting to meet." Power is generated within the structure of one's job and is not a specific personality characteristic.

How does one generate this power? I have thought quite a bit about this problem because of my own fears that I would not be successful in developing a strong power base, and have developed the following list of principles and guidelines that I try to follow. The suggestions that I have to offer are valid for both men and women. Although supposedly women have unique disadvantages in the battle for gaining support for their organizations' programs, I have seen many men struggle in that same battle.

1. Know yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do your weaknesses become strengths in certain situations and vice versa? What situations? Analyze what you can do to mitigate the effect of your weaknesses, your disadvantages in a particular situation.

2. Know your governing body. If possible, get to know them personally. Attend functions where they will be present. Read the newspaper religiously to keep up with what they are doing. Make the most out of meetings you attend to learn all

you can about them.

County Commissioner meetings can be tedious to attend, but I love to go to them. I only go when I have to, but when I am there I watch and listen very carefully to all that is going on. I want to know what people are asking for and how the Commissioners respond to their requests. I watch how these people make their requests and I try to correlate their methods and approaches to the Commissioners' responses. I want to know why the Commissioners give some people a very hard time while they respond to others enthusiastically and cordially. I look for individual differences among the Commissioners; what are their favorite causes, what are their favorite bones to pick, who are their friends, what are their alliances, what kinds of arguments or presentations sway them.

3. Identify the individuals who will influence the decisions of the governing body, educate them to the library's needs, and win their support.

In Durham, the previous County Manager looked to the Finance Director for advice regarding most issues facing the library. If the library did not have the Finance Director's support, there was little chance of winning the support of the County Manager who in turn was the key to winning support from the County Commissioners. When the library administration made the decision to recommend that SOLINET/OCLC be used for cataloging and retrospective conversion, the Finance Director and County Data Processing Director were taken to Greensboro to see the system up and running and to talk with their counterparts in Greensboro. Once they were educated in this way, they provided unconditional support to the library's recommendation, which then was accepted by the County Manager and the Commissioners.

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4. Sell yourself as the expert on library business. Prepare your reports and requests thoroughly, and present them in a clear and precise manner. Know the answers to questions. If you do not know the subject thoroughly, bring your staff experts with you to provide the answers. If you cannot provide the answer at the meeting, admit that you do not know and follow up the next day with the answer. Do not answer questions that were not asked and be sure to answer the questions that are asked. Do not waffle.

5. Be sure you have touched all bases required in your situation. If your library is a department of local government, be sure you have contacted all other departments which require input or whose support is either required or desired by the governing body. Except in extreme circumstances when there may be a confrontation between your Library Board and the County or City Manager, do not go to the governing body without the support of both your Board and the Manager. In those extreme circumstances, let the Board make the request or presentation. I have found that the governing body in Durham will not act if all parties who may potentially be involved in the results of the action have not been consulted.

6. Build the trust of those whose support you will require by maintaining open communications and giving your support when it is appropriate as well as requesting it.

7. Create opportunities to educate your governing body and to thank them for their support.

For the last several years we have invited the County Commissioners, Manager, and Library Board to join us for lunch. One year, the lunch was hosted by the library division heads and the Board, and the Commissioners were given a tour of the main library including the behind the scenes activities. Since that year, the Commissioners have been invited to join the entire staff for lunch on Staff Development Day, and to take part in a limited way in the training activities (for example, vendor demonstrations of automated circulation systems).

8. Operational rules often change in local government with change in management and change in elected officials. Be aware of the changes and how they affect your situation; whenever possible, use the new rules to your advantage.

9. Garner public support, particularly support from those on whom elected officials depend. Make sure the elected officials know there is public support for your program or request. Use your Library Board and Friends groups to contact officials personally, particularly if you do not have regular personal contact yourself.

I realized this past year the extreme importance of this step in winning support of the governing body when the library attempted and failed to get new branch libraries on a major bond issue to fund county capital improvement projects. Although I was complimented on my presentation to the Commissioners regarding the library's capital improvement needs, no one spoke

out in support of the requests at the public hearing. As a result, the library's requests remained low on the priority list and were not included on the bond issue. On the other hand, when only two individuals spoke out in support of another low priority item, that item was immediately moved to a high priority position.

10. Use the library to sell itself. Develop programs and services which will appeal to a broad segment of the community and which will attract people who will become spokespersons for the library. Use your staff to maintain a high profile for the library in the community through their involvement on interagency councils and regular contacts with other community institutions and businesses.

11. When you are successful in getting support from your governing body for your request, follow through and do what you said that you would do, and report back to the governing body the results of your efforts.

12. If you are not successful, do not give up. If your needs persist and your ideas are good, sometimes the only way to convince a governing body is to keep going back again and again. Do, however, reevaluate your request each time to see if there are alternate ways to reach the same goal which might be successful.

Summary

Although there may be disadvantages in being a female administrator in the effort to gain support from a governing body for the library's program, these disadvantages do not necessarily preclude a female director from being successful in that effort. The key is understanding what those disadvantages are and developing a strategy for overcoming them. The female director must have a clear understanding of herself and of the problem with which she is confronted, and she must take the steps to identify and utilize all resources that might be available to assist in the effort.

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