

Management in Public Libraries

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When asked to appear with Elizabeth Copeland and discuss public library management, I almost declined the invitation. Unlike Elizabeth, I do not have years of administrative experience to draw upon for this presentation. I became Director of the Davidson County Library System less than three years ago after completing the master of science requirements at the School of Library Science at Florida State University. Most of what I have learned in the area of library management is a direct result of talks with other library directors and the application of common sense to library problems. So I do not appear before you today with a wealth of administrative credentials; however I feel that sometimes a fresh approach can be helpful.

Besides inexperience, another reason I nearly declined the invitation to appear today was the fear that whatever I said would be taken to be merely another diatribe on "How I did it good at my library." Personally, I dislike sitting through these sessions, because most such presentations invariably become studies in somnolence both for the audience as well as for the speaker.

On the other hand, after a few of the "How to do it" type talks I personally found so painful, I heard several of my library colleagues remark how practical

and down-to-earth they found the speaker. Certainly, there is no accounting for personal preference, both in speakers and in managerial techniques.

There seem to be three alternative approaches to the practice of management currently in vogue within public libraries today. They are Management by "crisis," Management by "drives," and Management by "objectives." With the possible exception of management by "objectives" it is possible to find one of these approaches to management within every public library in North Carolina. As I describe each of these managerial approaches, try to decide if your boss, or more importantly you fall into one or more of these categories.

The crisis manager is essentially a fire-fighter. It seems that he is forever stamping out brush-fires within the organization. His employees and his library board often remark how indispensable he has become to the organization. In most cases this type of library manager remains aloof in his large, plushly paneled office until all hell breaks loose in some section of his organization. Then, and only then, does he go into action. Such action on the part of this administrator is distinctly self-fulfilling. At the end of the day, this individual can lean back in his over-stuffed executive chair and count on his fingers

the number of times he has personally solved various problems much too difficult for any of his other employees. The results of such firefighting are tangible; much more so than the rather obtuse and less measureable chores of creating, planning, organizing, motivating, and communicating. You may be sure that once the employees catch on to what is happening, the subordinates will insure that the Boss has crises. Think back to your library. How many times has the director been called on to give final approval on issuing a card to a new patron, or personally had the final say on payment of a ten cent overdue fine? If you can answer "yes" to these or similar questions, your library is probably managed by "crisis."

Another approach to the practice of management prevalent in public libraries in North Carolina is management by drives. This type of library manager, unlike the crisis manager, is not insulated from his employees by a huge office (though his employees frequently wish he were). More often than not he is down on the firing line closely watching the every move of everyone from department head to student assistant. The driver is constantly in motion scurrying from one area to another determined to make sure each employee puts in his fair share of work. As a result his library operates like a team of horses — lurching into action as the driver appears, then lapsing back into a slow walk as the driver attempts to bully his employees to get desired action. However, among his peers or before the library board this individual often appears insecure and unsure of himself. In some cases of this type, the individual has been fired from a previous job and now is "gun-shy," and so over-supervises his employees.

The practitioners of both management by crisis and management by drives have certain things in common. Both, for example, are complete failures at delegation, but for different reasons. The manager by crisis gives his subordinates the authority, but does not require that they accept the necessary responsibility. This individual in addition spends little if any time in the supervision of his employees. The manager by drives is also a failure at delegation, but unlike the crisis manager he gives his employees the responsibility, but not the authority. The driver is guilty of over-supervision of his employees. He is the individual who seeks to prevent crises by being on top of the situation before the crises begin. This approach is fine in theory, but in practice the driver can be in only one department of his library at a time. In his absence, problems begin to occur since no authority has been granted to his subordinates. Most experienced practitioners of management by drives are aware of this shortcoming, and so rarely leave their libraries for extended periods of time. For this reason, exponents of management by drive are conspicuous by their absence at state and national library conferences.

We have seen that both the manager by crisis and the manager by drives do not understand that decisions should be made on the lowest possible level. For example, if a library desk assistant can responsibly make a decision involving circulation for old encyclopedias, allow the decision to be made at this level. In addition to decision-making, both the crisis and the drives manager find that they can do most library activities faster and more efficiently than their employees, so they end up doing the activity themselves in-

stead of allowing their subordinates to solve the problems. Here, both the crisis and drives manager have generally come up through the ranks. Both learned to appreciate the value of statistics at the end of a busy day. Ah, the pile of books catalogued; the number of reference questions answered; the number of books circulated! As mentioned earlier such piles of books or cards constitute something measurable, something finite. In addition such statistics indicated that something was being accomplished.

As can be seen, our two managers have been exposed as nothing more than highly-paid technicians, and deep down inside they realize a feeling of insecurity which they eventually pass on to their organization. "Are we doing things right?" Are we doing the right things?" they ask. This deep-seated feeling of insecurity is magnified by such events as elimination of federal funds for public libraries and minuscule county and municipal library budget increases. The final result of this curious feeling by our two managers that the public library is not doing what it should results in the public library frantically searching, finding a void, and filling it. I am sure you have seen such actions: the public library as a day care center, the public library providing hot meals for all comers, the public library processing books for the schools. If I have stepped on any toes I apologize, but these activities either duplicate services of other institutions or just are not public library service.

Okay, you ask, what do YOU suggest public libraries do to improve their stature in the eyes of both libraries and the general public? My suggestion would be for libraries to do what they have always been doing, but do it better. A very good

example of this is Wake County Public Library's Information Center. Bill O'Shea has taken an age-old library commodity — information — and skillfully improved on traditional library methods of getting it to the user in understandable form. Not only has Wake County received national acclaim for the project, but local recognition has been tremendous. This is truly an example of doing better what we now do.

I firmly believe that unless public libraries improve present services through better management we will cease to exist as a viable institution. If you doubt this, witness the inroads the community college has made on what was considered a public library area — continuing education. Another disturbing trend is the establishment of public information departments within county and municipal governments. Doesn't the public library qualify as an "information department?"

As an alternative to management by "crisis" or to management by "drives," I would like to suggest that public libraries explore management by "objectives." Management by objectives or MBO has been termed "management by preaction rather than reaction." This approach to library management seeks through planning to eliminate crises within the organization. MBO offers the additional value of a system designed to achieve target results on a programmed and predictable basis.

"Impossible!" you say? In many types of libraries programmed budgeting has operated for several years. Ed Howard of Vigo County Public Library in Indiana has used this important managerial tool for a number of years. Howard places great emphasis upon allowing the library staff to view the library through the eyes of the user. Programmed budgeting is proving to

be a useful tool in management by objectives in Vigo County, Indiana.

In essence, MBO is composed of two basic components. They are the organizational mission statement and the organizational objectives. The purpose of the mission statement is to give everyone connected with the organization a central sense of where the organization is going.

Organizational objectives, unlike the mission statement, concentrate on the goals of the organization. These objectives should be written in terms of results desired, not in terms of activities. Thus it is essential to qualify the organization objectives.

Thus far, we have talked in theoretical terms of MBO. Now let us turn to the operational components of management by objectives. First, the organization must develop clearly defined, detailed job descriptions. Such job descriptions state the purpose of the job, give an illustrative position description, establish target levels of performance for each job, and monitor performance. By monitor, we mean to compare actual results with objectives (performance standards) and take corrective action where necessary. This represents the "key" to managing by objectives.

What then, are the possible benefits from a management by objectives system? One might expect an improved understanding of organizational priorities, a stronger commitment to achieve target results, better coordination of planning and central process, a simplification of day-to-day operations, improved allocation of time, higher morale and productivity, and finally more precise measurement of performance.

Today, I challenge public librarians to take stock of themselves and their organizations in an effort to move from crisis management or management by drives toward management by objectives. I see in clarification of our true objectives, possible solutions to many of the problems currently plaguing our profession today. In the words of a very old proverb: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there."

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