January 2015

Let the Community Lead: MPL’s Community-Led Strategic Planning Process

By Andrea Cecchetto and Leah Rucchetto

Markham Public Library’s 2015-17 Strategic Plan was developed through a community-led process, reflecting our community members’ opinions, ideas, thoughts, hopes, and dreams. Their contribution has shaped the way that Markham Public Library will support our community in the creation of the life and vibrant community that they desire. By adopting a community-led approach to strategic planning, MPL committed to creating community conversations that connect people and empower individuals.

Community Development is Not New

The library has long played a key role in facilitating community access to the tools for education and empowerment. These tools look different today as compared to 50 or even 20 years ago, but our role and the impact that we provide for the community is unchanged. Library Sector associations including the Urban Library Council have “supported the development of vibrant communities by strengthening and promoting the value of libraries as essential public assets,” (Becker).

To continue contributing to a vibrant community, MPL made a significant organizational change in 2012 with the introduction of the Community Librarian role. This role was introduced as a part of a major organizational transformation that resulted in professional librarians being removed from public service in the branches and repositioned as dedicated community development resources. MPL undertook this change as a result of a strategic commitment to reprioritizing the library’s involvement in community building. This decision was taken for a variety of reasons. First, the nature of the Markham community was such that there was a genuine need for community development; the city continues to experience massive growth and urbanization, and there is an increasingly diverse population base with complex needs and expectations for their community. Second, the library administration recognized the unique potential libraries possess to engage disparate community stakeholders in an impartial way to bring them to a common table. Third, MPL has long been committed internally to principles of engagement and innovation. Staff have developed internal expertise in managing and creating change and recognized the potential to apply this expertise to issues of community development. Fourth and finally, we saw this change as an investment in our own sustainability – with our customers’ changing relationship to information and other traditional library services, we were determined to invent our own future with respect to the relevance we have in our community.

This change has produced impressive results. Our Community Librarians have effectively carved a role for the library in a number of significant community issues: settlement; employment and skill development; support for the small business and self-employment sector;
civic engagement; social activism; health and wellness; learning and education; and arts and culture. Much of the community development work the Community Librarians engage in happens beyond the library’s walls. This has resulted in a broader understanding of how libraries contribute to community life, support self-directed learning, and increase democratic access.

**Turning Outwards**

In 2012, American Library Association President Molly Raphael began the *Empowering Voices, Transforming Communities* conversation within libraries. Raphael states that transformation happens when libraries engage in new behaviours and develop programs to support the priorities and aspirations of those communities. “This is different than a needs-assessment approach; it is based more on what communities’ dreams are,” (*Transforming Libraries*). Rich Harwood, president and founder of the nonprofit Harwood Institute for Public Innovation presents an approach that helped to inspire ALA’s continued focus and current approach to community engagement work. The Harwood approach to community engagement asks libraries and other organizations to “turn outwards”, rather than turning inwards, to facilitate growth, improvement, and innovation that will change communities. *The Work of Hope* (Harwood) not only calls for libraries to turn outward to the community but also calls on us to make use of the basic values of compassion, openness and humility, and the common good to allow us to bring people together and allow for meaningful change. “People must be willing to step forward and be in relationship with others—to see and hear one another, to acknowledge each other’s pain and aspirations, to know that we cannot go it alone in life.” Using the Harwood approach ALA is currently leading initiative to help all libraries use community engagement tools and techniques to better understand their communities and to encourage community based innovations in library service (Fiels).

Wanting to build on our existing community engagement and continue to turn outward to facilitate our growth we turned our community stakeholders – residents, board members, non-users, municipal staff and our own employees – to help develop our strategic priorities. In fact, when developing our strategic planning process, staff committed to allow the strategic priorities for the next three years to emerge through the consultation process, thereby engaging the community directly in determining the role of the library in their own lives. We wanted our strategic plan to be created as a result of our listening and reflecting back the wisdom of the community, and harnessing its collective creativity to identify opportunities.

MPL staff engaged one of Canada’s leading experts in the field of community development, Diane Abbey-Livingston, to guide the development of our engagement process. Diane has contributed extensively to the field of Organizational Development in her fifty years in the sector, and runs her own social research firm DAL and Associates, based in Toronto. Diane worked with the senior team to establish a process that engaged a broad team of staff to seek out the community’s participation in our project.

**Planning the Plan**

The community-led strategic planning process began with a call to staff to be involved in the project. Over 25 staff responded and came together to create the library’s planning process, and to participate in a unique program to prepare them for direct community engagement. This program was custom designed by Diane Abbey-Livingston in collaboration with Andrea Cecchetto, Manager of Learning and Growth and Leah Rucchetto, Community Librarian at MPL. This program was
designed to focus on the Art of Conversation in the community engagement process. The art of community conversations invested heavily in training our staff to listen without judgment, clarify for understanding and probe for meaning. It also requires the ability to overcome the desire to prescribe solutions and act as a knowledge expert, and rather to surrender to the wisdom of the community. Staff invested in this training for several days over a three month period to create a plan for engaging the community. This workgroup – which included staff at all levels of the organization from Pages to Senior Managers – identified key stakeholders and developed a strategy for seeking out their participation. We determined to use a multifaceted approach with community consultation workshops, community focus groups, special issues focus groups, a survey, and targeted interviews as methods of connecting with our stakeholders. Prior to reaching out to the community, the team conducted extensive community research and asset mapping, building on the knowledge base created by our Community Librarians. It was critical to us that the information collected would be valid and reliable, accurately reflecting the views of our community. Combining MPL’s research with data from Environics allowed us to tailor a strategy that connects with the diverse groups within the City of Markham to create a plan that would best allow us to connect with them.

To ensure we were able to access opinions from our community members not able to participate in face-to-face conversations, we developed a survey (40 questions). This survey was an opportunity to get to know more about our community members’ library usage and opinions on service. We asked our community members a wide variety of questions on topics such as how they like to spend their time, how they get around, the types of new services they would like from a library in the future, their information consumption habits, and their goals for the next five years. Our survey was made available online as well as in print to ensure access for those without the ability to complete an online version. Our print surveys were placed at over sixty locations across the city along with information about our upcoming consultations. Our community partners played an active role in the widespread promotion of both our survey and invitation to our consultations and focus groups.

Our community consultations were valuable opportunities to connect face-to-face with our community members to build relationships, and hear their stories. We actively listened and let our community members share their personal hopes as well as those of the community. These conversations, and the in-depth qualitative data we gathered from them, allowed us to add depth to information gathered through our survey.

We encouraged all staff members to actively engage with the community. Staff were encouraged to invite their friends, families, and networks to participate in our consultations using the invitations that we made available in both English and Chinese. Data taken from our community consultation showed that a personal invitation was by far the most effective method of inviting community members. During our first session, 48% of participants had attended because they had received an invitation from staff – combined with “word of mouth” and “being referred by another community member” these direct invitations accounted for 70% of the methods by which participants learned about MPL’s community consultations.

Our research helped us to determine the best locations for our consultations. A total of 15 community consultations were held across the city. Nine were held in community centres, and
six were held in partners’ facilities, which allowed us to reach our diverse community groups. To best welcome newcomers, we had translation services available in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Tamil.

A dedicated team of staff members facilitated our community consultations using their training from *The Art of Relationship Building*. Large group facilitators welcomed community members, introduced them to our process, ensured that the conversations stayed on track, and delivered the session’s closing while table facilitators ensured that each community member had an opportunity to share their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, while recording the information exactly as community members had expressed it.

We Had Questions, They Had Answers
While our community consultations gave us an opportunity to connect with community members about their hopes for themselves and for their community as a whole, we also wanted to allow for a time and place for in-depth explorations of specific topics that emerged as important to the community. To allow for these in-depth conversations we held four focus groups. The topics were determined by both the responses to our survey and the conversations in our community consultations. Our focus groups were an hour long and held inside our library facilities. The focus groups were facilitated by staff trained in active listening. In total over three hundred community members were able to engage with us face-to-face to share their thoughts, opinions, goals, and hopes for themselves, their family and friends, and for the City of Markham.

The conversations that we had were powerful. They resonated with our community members and our staff felt honoured to be at the table, privy to our community’s hopes and dreams. Community members told us that they felt privileged to be able to share their opinions and connect with others. One community member shared the feedback that based on their previous experiences they had never dreamed that anyone would ask of their opinion on a public organization.

Inspired by *The Work of Hope*’s approach to creating a dialogue with community (Harwood), we asked our community members three questions: what is your vision for yourself and your community by 2018; what challenges do you anticipate facing by this time; and in what ways do you want the library to help you achieve these dreams. The intention of these questions was to identify what mattered in the community (not the library) and to understand how what opportunities the community values for library service. Firstly, our stakeholders shared their values and priorities for the next three years: family and friends; education; community; employment; achievement of personal goals; life transitions; and settlement. Secondly, they shared their challenges: urbanization; lack of community connection; finance; health and well being; social issues such as the environment and racism; learning; employment; settlement; life transitions. Lastly, we discussed how they felt that the library could help them meet their goals through: programming; community development; use of space; collections; expanded services; technology; and access to library and community information. With this information about where our community was, and where they hoped to go, we could begin the next step of the process – creating objectives that would allow us to support our community members.

The Ongoing Conversation
Building on the already high level of staff engagement in our strategic planning process, we called on our staff to help develop objectives to address the issues raised in our community consultations. Staff worked within
the framework of the areas highlighted in our Mission for 2015-2017: read, play, study, explore ideas, express creativity, and connect with others. These areas will allow us, as a library, to contribute to the empowerment and success of the Markham community. Staff were provided with thinking papers and data from our consultations, and came together in lively discussion, over the concepts and ideas provided through our consultation, to create the objectives that would allow us to meet our mandate for the next three years.

The final MPL strategic plan was created by shaping the recommendations from all stakeholders consulted. In this way, it is a reflection of the needs and hopes of the MPL community in its broadest sense. At the time of this writing, the final draft of the strategic plan is being prepared for publication, and once again, staff have come forward to develop opportunities to share this work with the community. Staff involved in this planning identified the need to invite the community to celebrate the accomplishment of the strategic plan and recognize their agency in the development of their own community. The launch of the strategic plan is seen by the staff involved in its development as a starting point for a lasting conversation with the community, one in which we can continue to turn outwards.

The authors
Andrea Cecchetto is Markham Public Library’s Manager of Learning and Growth and Leah Rucchetto is a Branch Librarian, Markham Public Library.

References


Louderback, Pamela. "Turn your focus outward: academic libraries should create learning communities in their local areas as well as among the faculty and students at their institutions." Information Outlook July-Aug. 2013: 20+. Academic OneFile. Web. 27 Dec. 2014.
