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Developing a Community-Led Strategy

By John Pateman

This paper outlines how Thunder Bay Public Library (TBPL) developed a community-led strategy. I will describe what worked for us, but each solution has to be driven by local circumstances and community needs – which is the essence of a community-led library. We used tools and techniques which have been developed by Edmonton, Vancouver, Halifax and other public libraries in Canada. There is never a one-model-fits-all when it comes to community-led, but we now have some tried and tested approaches which provide a blue print and road map for developing community-led services.

What is Strategy?
Strategy is at the heart of a community-led library. It drives everything we do, from staff and service Structures, to Systems (policies and procedures) and Culture (‘the way we do things around here’). If a library does not have a community-led strategy then it cannot be a community-led library. The Strategy provides the WHY a library service exists, WHAT it is trying to achieve, and HOW it is going to achieve its ambitions. The community must be actively involved in all three stages of this process.

Most public libraries have a Strategic Plan but how many of these Plans drive every aspect of the library service? How many staff and patrons are aware of these Plans and put them into practice on a daily basis? I would expect that ‘not many’ is the answer to both of these questions. If staff and patrons are not actively engaged in the development of the Strategic Plan, it is unlikely that they will know or remember what is in it; and it is even more unlikely that they will own and deliver it.

When I arrived at TBPL there was a Strategic Plan which had taken some time, effort and expense to produce. It looked very attractive and had some very worthy contents. But nobody owned it. When I asked each member of staff ‘what is the purpose of TBPL’ I got a different answer every time, based on individual personal interpretations of why a public library exists. Everyone was in the same boat (TBPL) but they were all rowing in different directions. It’s a very useful exercise to hold a meeting with your staff and ask them why the public library exists – if you get different answers it means that your organisation either has no strategy or that this Strategy is not owned by staff.

Why Does it Matter?
Strategy which has been developed with the active engagement of all key stakeholders – community, staff, board, partners, suppliers - creates a common understanding of why the library exists and what it is trying to achieve. It means that there should be no surprises. It means that Structures, Systems and Culture can be aligned with the Strategy. It means that every aspect of the whole organisation is pulling together and heading in the same direction.

Strategy should be driven by community needs and aspirations. These are identified through
relationship building, community profiling, partnership working and community asset mapping. You need to involve as many people – and as many different people – as possible as part of the strategy development process. Do not just rely on the ‘usual suspects’ – active library users, current partners, the ‘great and the good’. The experts in this process are the community and so they should have the loudest voice, whether they are active users, passive users or non users. A range of different techniques should be used to engage each of these groups.

Who should be involved?
Active users (20%) are the easiest to reach. These are the people we know and like and who use us regularly. They are in the library lots and often and so we can engage them through conversation at the desk or on the library floor. While the conversation should be structured, this does not mean asking them a pre-selected set of questions, which suggests that decisions have already been made and they are just being asked to validate pre-determined options. The conversation should be open and focused on their needs, including their non-library needs.

Passive users (20%) are relatively easy to reach. If they have a library card we have an address or phone number to contact them. This contact will serve two purposes: it will enable a conversation to identify their needs as part of the Strategy development process; and it will create a marketing opportunity to tell them about all the changes which have taken place since they last used the library. This may encourage them to become active users again.

Non-users (60%) are the hardest to reach. We don’t know who they are or where they live. They will include some people who think that the library is ‘not for them’. This maybe because they have never used a library and cannot see how it is relevant to their lives and needs. Or they may think that you need ‘money and brains’ to use a library. Others may buy their books and get their information from the internet and think that the library has nothing to offer them. Whatever the reason for not using the library, a conversation which focuses on their needs will quickly establish what the library has to offer or create the opportunity to develop a new service which can meet those needs.

How do you go about it?
If your organisation has the skills, experience and knowledge to develop its own Strategy then this should be the starting point. If not, you should use a partner or consultant to work with you, but one of the outcomes should be that you build the capacity to do it yourselves next time around; Strategy is a never ending process. Ideally every member of the library staff should be skilled in having conversations and building relationships which can identify community needs. Other techniques can include open public meetings and focus groups. But these should be without agendas and not too much pre-packaged information. You need people to come to the process with open minds and not pre-conceived ideas. You want them to be able to imagine or re-imagine how a library can meet their needs.

Strategy requires capacity, effort and resources and this should be deployed proportionately. For example: 20% on active users, 20% on passive users and 60% on non users. Mixing these groups up can be useful as well. Mixed patron / staff groups are also very illuminating. Library workers sometimes make decisions based on assumed needs, and these assumptions can be challenged or questioned in a mixed staff / patron focus group. The whole process should take no longer than 6 months and can be completed as quickly as 12 weeks. More time just creates the capacity to gather
more data, but the sample size is unlikely to change the overall findings and outcomes. Once needs have been identified they then need to be prioritized because a public library will never have all the resources it requires to meet all of the needs in the community. Prioritization is a challenging process. If it is not managed sensitively then it can become divisive with perceptions that services and resources are being taken away from one community and given to another. The best way to avoid this is to bring all of the stakeholders together for this process. This way they can learn about each others’ needs and identify where there are common and specific needs. Strategy will drive resource allocation, so everyone needs to understand why decisions are being made. For example, active users must know why resources which were being spent on services they use are now being redirected to fund new services which meet the needs of non users. At the end of the process the library service will make the final decision and must ensure that all needs are taken into account, including those which do not have majority support. For example, if a library worker identifies that there is an urgent need for health information for sex workers, this need must be addressed even if it is not supported by all sections of the community and staff.

**How do we know if it’s working?**
Strategy must be constantly reviewed and evaluated to ensure that it’s meeting community needs and the community must play an active role in this evaluation process. It is not possible to constantly check with every member of the community that the public library is meeting their needs, and so mechanisms should be developed which can test and assess the effectiveness of the Strategy. For example, one of the outcomes of the Strategy development process at TBPL was a Community Action Panel (CAP). This is a permanent, but always changing, group of citizens who meet regularly to plan, design, deliver and evaluate library services. Anyone can join the CAP and all are welcome. It is broadly representative and reflective of Thunder Bay demographics and any gaps are filled using positive action. The role of the CAP is to co-produce, monitor and evaluate library outcomes. A similar role is played by the Youth Action Committee (YAC), another permanent group, who work with us to ensure that the needs of young people are being met by TBPL. The YAC is a good example of targeted community evaluation. The YAC evaluates those services which were designed to meet the needs of young people. This avoids the process being dominated by ‘mob rule’ or the ‘usual suspects’. The library service is for everyone and not just active users.

Library workers are another essential part of the evaluation process. Through their conversations with patrons and relationship building with non-users they can constantly evaluate whether Strategy is meeting community needs. For this to work they have to own the Strategy. The best way to test this is to ask them the same question – ‘what is the purpose of the public library?’ – before and after the Strategy development process. If their answers do not change then it is likely that they do not own the new Strategy. For example, if I now ask any member of TBPL (from cleaner to director) ‘what is the purpose of TBPL’ I will get exactly the same answer. They will tell me that the five Strategic Directions for TBPL 2014-18 are Lifelong Learning, Innovation & Change, Local Economy, Community Well-being and Personal Growth, and Diversity and Social Inclusion.

People don’t buy what we do, they buy why we do it, so creating a common and wide understanding of the public library purpose is essential to the development of a community-led public library. With a clear and owned
Strategy in place, driven and informed by community needs, it is possible to align Structures, Systems and Cultures which enable these needs to be identified, prioritized and met. A clear Strategy helps to manage patron expectations. An owned Strategy helps staff to see the link between their daily tasks and the Strategic Objectives. With both staff and community in the same boat and rowing in the same direction the community-led public library can go further and faster.

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