



Being an Effective Board Member

This material first appeared as a chapter in
The Ontario Library Trustee's Handbook,
by Randee Loucks. Revised edition.
Toronto : OLA Press, ©2001.
ISBN 0-88969-044-8.
The book may be purchased from the OLASore
at www.accessola.com.

The actual operation of the Public Library Board, that is the specifics of how the Board itself operates, is a relatively straightforward process if the Board is mindful of its structure and attends to a few simple practices.

How can new trustees become effective Board members?

As a new trustee armed with a belief in the importance of the public library to the community and a commitment to the public's democratic right to information, you are in a position to make a real difference to the library and to your community. In addition to the many responsibilities of trusteeship and the roles with respect to the CEO, Municipal Council and the community, you also have a responsibility to ensure that the Board functions well in its own right.

1 Orientation is the first step

The outgoing Board and the CEO should provide an orientation program. Use this handbook as an adjunct to the orientation session and seek further information in the *Trustee Orientation Kit* and other trustee development publications listed in the References Appendix at the end of this publication.

Most trustees find the orientation process an overwhelming experience. Take your time reviewing the available materials but keep them close at hand so that you can refer to them often. You will also need to learn more about your own library in order to become an effective trustee. A sample checklist of items required for orientation is provided on the next page.

1 Put board development on every Board meeting agenda

The ongoing education of the Board is an aspect that is often neglected because of lack of time and money. As with every important endeavour, keeping current on issues and advances can make the difference between success and failure. Boards need to continue learning their jobs in order to be as effective as possible. There are a number of learning opportunities available for trustees.

LIBRARY ORIENTATION MATERIALS CHECKLIST

As you go through your orientation stage, ensure that you have the following materials so that you can correlate the information in this Handbook with the reality at your library.

- n A directory of Board members, with brief profiles including names, addresses, telephone numbers, appointing bodies, and community contacts.
- n An organizational chart of the library including titles and responsibilities of key personnel.
- n A community profile with relevant statistics.
- n The local municipal bylaw establishing your library and its Board.
- n The constitution and bylaws of your Board.
- n Last year's Annual Report.
- n Last year's Board Minutes.
- n The library's mission statement, goals and objectives, short and long range plans.
- n A profile of your library – its history, number of branches, size and type of collection, circulation, etc.
- n All written policies of your Board
- n The current and proposed budgets.
- n Sample contracts and terms of employment of staff, including any union agreements.
- n An Advocacy Profile including names of local municipal councillors, local MPPs and MPs with brief profiles.

1 **Attend conferences and other training opportunities.**

Each year the Ontario Library Association presents two provincial conferences.

In November, delegates from public, school, college and university libraries and from all aspects of library operations meet at the **Ontario Library Association Policy Forum** to discuss the issues on which the Association is working and to give the library community an opportunity to influence the direction of the work.

In early February, the library community gathers again at the OLA's **Super Conference** that runs for three to four days. Renowned speakers join with other library experts to share their knowledge and expertise with over 3,000 library practitioners from across the province. It is by far Canada's largest library education event and includes a stream of programs specifically for trustees.

Throughout the year, both OLA and the Ontario Library Service offer other training opportunities in the form of workshops throughout the year. Special training sessions for individual Boards or groups of Boards can also be arranged.

1 **Network.**

Meeting with other Boards in person or electronically is a useful way to increase your knowledge of library affairs and to refresh your perspective on your own library's situation.

OLTA offers a listserv to members that provides a continuing forum to discuss questions and topics of interest to trustees.

Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS) holds regular Trustee Council meetings in several regions throughout the southern and eastern part of the province. These afford trustees a chance to visit other libraries in the region as well as share information. OLTA provides an update at these meetings.

1 Read.

OLTA and the Ontario Library Service have collaborated for several years on a wide variety of publications on topics of interest to trustees. These can serve as a focus for discussions within the context of Board meetings or may be studied by individual trustees at their leisure. *Trustee Tips* and *InsideOLTA* are two popular publications used in this manner. OLTA also issues *OLTAAlert* when a legislative problem or crisis occurs.

1 Take an active role in the broader library community

The broader library community is made up of the various public libraries, library associations and library-related organizations that are concerned with public library service in Ontario. It is important for trustees to expand their role into the broader library community in order to gain a complete understanding of library issues.

Membership in OLTA is extremely important because it is through OLTA that trustees have a strong, collective voice to lobby government and to have an impact on legislation affecting public libraries. OLTA provides individual trustees with a voice on the province-wide Strategic Directions Council, the body currently developing a new strategic plan for Ontario's libraries.

Trustees can expand their influence to the national level through the Canadian Library Trustees' Association, a division of the Canadian Library Association. In today's environment of enormous technological change, it is important to keep as broad a perspective as possible. CLA also offers an annual conference and the popular Library Advocacy Now! program, the most effective training program for library advocates.

1 Evaluate the Board's performance at regular intervals

Board self-evaluation is an important aspect of Board development that helps Boards to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to plan how they can improve their collective performance. Board self-evaluation covers how the Board complies with its own policies and assesses its performance

HOW DOES YOUR BOARD RATE?

Questions to consider when the Board reviews its performance for the year.

1. Is your Board functioning as a unit?
2. Does your Board have a clear vision of its role?
3. Does your Board fulfill all its responsibilities, particularly those outlined in the *Public Libraries Act*, R.S.O. 1990, chapter P44 and Regulation 976?
4. Has your Board reviewed its by-laws in the past three years?
5. Does your Board leave the administration of the library to the CEO? Does it consult with the CEO on how the library is operating?
6. Is your Board thoughtful in its choices for Board and committee chairpersons?
7. Does the Board meet on a scheduled basis, using advance agendas and facts and figures?
8. Do individual trustees have good attendance records and participate in the meetings?
9. Do trustees accept assignments on behalf of the library?
10. Does your Board read and discuss the major issues affecting libraries?
11. Does your Board watch for signs of problems and react quickly?
12. Does your Board see itself, and act, as an advocate for good library service at local, provincial and national levels? Does your Board lobby and keep up on legislation?
13. Does your Board belong to local, provincial and national library trustee associations as part of this advocacy?
14. Does your Board consult the OLTA Council representative in your area to discuss library policies and practices in Ontario that may affect your library? Does your Board ever invite an OLTA Council member to be a guest at your meetings?
15. Does your Board take the time to do a good job: to seek out facts; to involve CEO, staff and community as appropriate; to learn through reading, attendance and participation in workshops; to anticipate and plan for needs?
16. Are accurate records of Board activities and policies kept on file at the library?
17. Have these policies been examined recently as to their present relevance?
18. Does your Board understand and use services available provincially and federally?
19. Is your Board seen in the community as a vigorous advocate of the people in supplying the best possible library service?

supporting the library's annual plan. Ideally, this appraisal should be carried out regularly, or at the very least, once a year. How does your Board rate? Consider the questions opposite.

How can trustees facilitate better meetings?

Legislation requires the Library Board to meet ten times a year. Most trustees serve on at least one committee requiring additional meetings; working with Council and the community also demands time. It is important to make the most of Board meetings by limiting discussion to Board issues and ensuring that these receive proper attention.

Focus your board meetings on your issues, your services, your programs. Do not leave any meeting without a significant decision being made.

1 Improve communication skills

As a member of a team, you have a responsibility to participate and express your views and opinions on Board issues. Active participation as a team member involves active listening as well as speaking. The Board team is made up of several different personalities and it takes time to function effectively. It is important to accept that different people debate issues in different ways. Some wish to make a decision quickly while others need more time to ponder all sides before arriving at a decision. They may also have differing values that cause them to have

differing opinions. The debate will occasionally become heated but there may be no other way to arrive at the collective values that underlie Board actions. Being attentive to the process of team communication as well as to the content of issue discussions is an important skill to develop.

What is the role of the Board chairperson?

The role of the Board chairperson is to ensure the proper functioning of the Board. This includes ensuring that meetings run smoothly and that the "rules of order" for debate are followed. The chairperson needs to facilitate discussion of

agenda items and ensure that all members are heard. The chairperson is often delegated to speak for the Board in certain situations, but does not supervise the CEO.

What is the role of individual Board members?

All Board members have a responsibility to make the Board function well. The Board functions as a legal entity, a unit. No one Board member acts on behalf of the Board without being authorized specifically to do so. Individual Board members should be prepared to participate in Board discussion and share their views on all issues. In meetings away from the Board, trustees should keep in mind that their actions and words reflect back on their Board. They are "ambassadors" for their Board.

Speaking with one voice

Board deliberations may at times involve heated debate. Eventually, the Board will arrive at a decision. Hopefully, the decision reached is consensual, but this will not always be the case. It is important for all Board members, citizen appointees and Councillor-members alike, to realize that once the decision is made, the Board speaks with one voice. Regardless of whether all Board members agree with the decision or not, the Board's decision stands. Board members who do not agree may request a recorded vote as a record of their disagreement, but once the decision is made, that is the Board's official position.¹⁵

How can current trustees affect the next Board?

One of the best ways to affect the next Board is to start thinking about Board succession soon after the new term begins. The effectiveness of the next Board is a function of how well the current Board does its job. This is particularly true with respect to the success of the Board's advocacy efforts in two arenas: 1) reinforcing the library's identity within the community and 2) making Council aware of the library's needs. The first component helps to develop an interest on the part of citizens to become involved in the affairs of the library. The second will

¹⁵ Carver and Carver, op. cit., p. 31.