

**American Library Association
LibLearnX
Building Strong Trustee Relationships
Speakers: Tonya Ryals**

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>> TONYA RYALS: Hi, everyone. Ooh, that's loud. Oh, that's -- hmm, okay.

So my name's Tonya Ryals. I am the director of the MacDonald Public Library in New Baltimore, Michigan. My bio on the program may still say Vermont. I'm new to the MacDonald Public Library, and so it's a recent transition.

This is also my first time presenting in person at a conference. All of my other presentations up to this point have been virtual, so this is a very weird thing for me, very odd transition, so bear with me.

ALA sent something that they would like for me to start off with, so I will just read that really quickly. ALA is aware of growing concerns related to the safety and security of library workers across the nation. Due to the sensitive nature of this session and the well-being of its participants, please refrain from capturing and sharing photos, videos, or other identifying information from this session. However, we welcome and encourage all to share their experiences and excitement for LibLearnX on social media throughout the weekend.

So with that in mind, we'll go ahead and we'll get started. I will be talking to start about things you can do to build relationships with trustees prior to challenges and then things you can do to encourage and strengthen those relationships during challenges.

So to start, before challenges, you can start with an orientation for your trustees. You can do this for new trustees, but you can also do this for trustees that have been on the board for some time. Perhaps they had an orientation when they started, perhaps they didn't. Either way, you could go ahead and have one now.

Typically, this orientation would include a tour of the building, a list of the library policies and copies of each, past meeting minutes and financial information. And that just helps to encourage them to know what all is going on at the library.

You can also start building that relationship by having regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings with each of your trustees. During those meetings, you can discuss mutual aims and what you hope to both achieve for the library. You can also use this time to get to know them more, get to know their knowledge, their talents, their skills. And you can use this as a way to harness those to benefit the library.

You should also start establishing lines of communication. So preferred methods such as phone or email, whether you prefer those to be through library-directed phones and emails or time frame. So that could be expected time frames for responses, but it can also be hard cutoff times. So if a trustee emails you at 9:00 at night, they should know that you're not going to respond to them until the next morning.

You should also start preparing your policies before you receive any material reconsideration requests as best you can. That would include your collection development policy, programs and displays. If you do not already have one, now is a great time to do that. And those would just outline how the library goes about developing programs and how they go about setting up displays. You should also, of course, have a strong material or program reconsideration policy. And in terms of the board meeting policy, you will want to include how the public can address the board, how they would get added to the agenda, how the agenda is created, and how trustees can add to the agenda.

Typically speaking -- and I know that likely you were all very aware of this -- but typically speaking, the director writes the policy with input from the staff, and then the board approves that policy.

So, again, prior to any reconsideration request, start with training. The training would go over roles, responsibilities, separating duties between the trustees, the director, and the staff, and communication. Communication would typically include your state's open meeting law and information regarding public record requests.

The training should be regular and consistent. It's very helpful to get it on to a board training schedule that you build

for the year. And you can seek that through your state library and also United for Libraries. Jillian is here from United for Libraries and would be happy to talk with anybody. And she also very kindly left some United for Libraries materials here on the table that anyone is welcome to take if they would like.

And it's also really helpful for them to get training from you. So this could be short training at each meeting. You can just build it into your agenda. Educate them on the library. Just tell them a little bit about what's going on. It could be about programs. It could be about policies. It could be about the services that you offer.

It's really helpful to just frame this as an elevator pitch so that way you have a concise statement that you're making, and that way you can keep it short just so that they have a good soundbite about what's going on. And remember -- oh, and there's a link to writing an elevator pitch in the handout, if any of you are interested in looking at that. And remember that you are a smart, competent, and capable professional, and you are well qualified to provide that training to them.

When material reconsideration requests do start coming in, typically speaking, there's not just one reconsideration request. It's likely that there are multiple ones. There may be other things going on, as well, such as FOIA requests, political issues at hand. There can be a lot of things going on rather than just receiving one material reconsideration request, so do prepare yourself for that.

Reinforce those communication channels. If you've not already set those up, it's not too late to do so. Use those established channels. It's really helpful in these instances to make sure that you go through library-specific email accounts, including for yourself and for the trustees.

Be transparent, clear, and accessible in your language. Many of our trustees are very intelligent. They are highly qualified professionals, but this is a somewhat niche issue that they've likely never encountered before, so it's really helpful when you're talking about these things to lower the level down to about an eighth-grade reading level. And it's helpful in just ensuring that everyone understands what's going on, and then it also ensures that the trustees have the language that they need in order to communicate about this to other people.

You can also practice facilitating conversations. It's likely that this will come up at board meetings, but it will

also likely come up throughout the -- well, all the time.

There are some handouts. There are links in the handout to some information about facilitating difficult conversations, but in general it's helpful to establish a feedback loop where you listen, clarify, and then respond.

Finally, find your ally or your allies on the board. These are people who are prone to listen to you and who support the library, and it's helpful to talk with them, let them know everything that's going on, and they can really help to speak to those issues at board meetings.

Unfortunately, sometimes at board meetings there may be someone who doesn't necessarily want to listen to what the director has to say, but they're willing to listen to a fellow trustee. So find your allies and make sure that you're utilizing them effectively. And you can also communicate your concerns to them. If there is a particular issue at hand that you think needs to be addressed by the board, then that can be another channel that you use to inform that conversation.

And, again, once reconsideration requests have started coming in, you can go to more training. It's really important to do some training on intellectual freedom for the board members. It's great to do that with the staff as well, but the board members need to be informed on this as well.

It's also really good for them to have training on meeting structures. For some this may include parliamentary procedure. And it would also be really helpful for them to have training on how the policies actually work in practice. So looking at them on the form can inform, but actually hearing about how the steps work in actuality is really helpful. It's ideal for that training to come from you. You can also talk to the state library and the State Library Association for the training on intellectual freedom and on meeting structure.

It's also really great to provide them with an elevator pitch and talking points that they can use when they're talking to people out in the community about what's going on at the library.

And, again, more communication. There's a lot of information gathering that will happen between meetings for these, so make sure that, again, you can set up regular meetings with the board members. It's really helpful if you can establish those strong relationships beforehand. But even if things are a little

tenuous, still make sure that you provide them with a time where they can come in and feel comfortable talking with you about what's going on.

And, again, really firm up your boundaries. This is going to take up a lot of time. It's going to be very hard work to have deal with everything, and especially if the trustee may want to meet with you at 7:00 at night. Is that okay with you? And so make sure that your boundaries are strong. Make sure that you're not taking up too much of your personal time, because you need time to recover and relax as best you can during these types of instances.

If you have a board member who is encouraging or otherwise promoting book challenges, then your call might be coming from inside the house. If that's happening, it's likely that you will see that trustee or trustees are platforming at meetings, and they're delivering long soliloquies about their opinion on a particular book or a particular topic of books.

It's important that the chair be up to date and informed on what their role is and how they can structure the meeting to help put an end, because, honestly, it's just not productive to what a board meeting is supposed to be accomplishing.

You can put time limits on conversations. You can build those into the agenda. Make sure you stick to those time frames. The board meeting could also take a pause to cool down. If somebody is in the midst of a very heated discussion, maybe it's time to take a five-minute break. We'll come back to it. It's perfectly acceptable to take a pause.

I have also heard of some boards who make a habit of delaying contentious votes. So anytime there's a very heated discussion, they always wait and vote on it the next month.

I can go either way on this, because on the one hand, it's really difficult to have that weighing over your head for a full month until the board meets again. On the other hand, it ensures that trustees are coming in with a cooler mind. Perhaps they've had an opportunity to review all the information and get more informed before they make a vote and then vote at the next month.

So there's pros and cons here. And, of course, time frames are important, because sometimes you don't have the luxury of a month in order to make a vote on that.

You may also notice platforming outside of meetings. This could take the form of social media posts or letters to the editor, media interviews. There's a lot of different ways that this can be set up. It's important to know your bylaws and your policies and what that says about trustees representing the library when they make statements.

It can be helpful in some instances for the public library to issue a statement, especially if the trustee is representing themselves as a member of the board and they are making a statement that is contrary to what the board has decided and what the public view of the library is.

So there are pros and cons here. You'll want to play out those scenarios before you make a decision and before you issue any statement, but it can be helpful in promoting transparency and really informing the public on the situation at hand and just providing them with more context.

As a last resort, you may consider that a trustee may need to be removed from the board. Overall, the purpose of a library board is to promote the overall well-being of the library. If someone is actively working against the library, it's understandable that this will cross your mind.

If that is something that may seem like something that the library should do, be aware of what your bylaws say. Your bylaws may have information written in about how you can remove a trustee from the board. It does tend to be pretty uncommon, so it's likely that it's not in your bylaws.

There may be information through your state local -- that could be your city or your county laws may have information on that. And it's important to know what the authority and power of the board is. Do they have that capacity to remove a trustee?

So these are things that you would want to explore if that were a consideration. Do proceed with caution if that's something that becomes a possibility. That trustee would claim that they're being censored, and there could be some repercussions, so do think that through very carefully before you decide anything and even before you speak to an attorney about it.

It's likely that you would hear from members of the public that they think that a certain trustee should be removed from the board or that they should resign from the board. That's

something that is relatively common, maybe because that trustee promotes intellectual freedom, or maybe it's because the trustee promotes removing a book. Either way, it's relatively common to hear members of the public say that. I don't -- it doesn't typically go very far, but it can catch fire within a community.

So some final thoughts before we wrap up. It's important to build healthy relationships with good communication. You should listen and encourage learning. Don't shy away from what needs to be said. I didn't talk about this too much within the presentation, but it's important to be firm in your professional ethics and to be willing and able to say that out loud, especially at board meetings. You don't want to wait until the night after to send an essay through email to your board members. The time to say it is at that board meeting, as hard as it may be to do that.

And build a strong library support network within your community. If possible, do that beforehand. But from my experience, when this information starts becoming public, very often your supporters start to contact you, and they start to naturally form a group together.

So with all of that being said, thank you all so much for coming today. It's been really great. I've always said that I will talk about libraries with anybody who will sit still for five minutes.

So in honor of you guys sitting still for longer than five minutes, my cat tax. That's Max and Sadie. My contact information is on the screen, and you're welcome to reach out to me with anything that you might have. I also have a link to a handout with resources, and that is on the app and on the website.

Again, there's information here from United for Libraries that is very helpful. And I also recently spoke to Urban Libraries Unite. They recently released a toolkit for dealing with controversy around a Drag Queen Story Hour, but it is information that's applicable to other controversies as well. So do go over to their booth and check that out. I think that would be very helpful. That just came out, I believe, today.

So I think that we have some time for questions. Yes. I have a mic. It's currently off, but you can flip it.

>> Is it on? No?

>> TONYA RYALS: Yeah.

>> Yeah. All right. So you indicated that there -- you may -- or, like, a library leader may encounter a situation where possibly the removal of a board member might be necessary. Did I understand that correctly?

>> TONYA RYALS: Yes.

>> So explain to me again when would you get to that -- to me, it seems kind of extreme, so I want to understand.

>> TONYA RYALS: It is a very extreme scenario and hopefully one that no one will ever encounter. I had an instance come up where I had a trustee who was writing letters to the editor. He was seeking out media interviews with conservative news outlets and set himself up in kind of a martyr role and was very much a proponent of there shouldn't be these types of books in the library, and I'm here advocating against that, and in general not acting as though he were promoting the overall well-being of the library.

And so that was something that crossed my mind. I did not pursue that, but that was something that crossed my mind, where it was, like, this is not the role of the board and this is impacting their capacity to function and provide governance to the library. So...

>> So my feedback is if you get to that point where you feel desperate about a certain board member that might be working against the library or the entire board that you really get legal counsel on that, because I can see --

>> TONYA RYALS: Yes.

>> -- a lot of potential issues with that. So I just wanted to understand that.

>> TONYA RYALS: Absolutely, yes. Yes.

>> ANITA: Hi. My name's Anita. I'm an 18-year trustee in the second largest library in the state of Illinois. If trustees are elected in your area, the only way to remove someone off the board is to have them recalled, or sometimes they just lose steam because their one agenda is not being forwarded in their mind.

If they're appointed, as many trustees are in some areas, by

the mayor or by a village board, then speaking with them to have them removed, that would be within the mayor's rights because they're appointed. I just thought I'd bring that up to you.

>> TONYA RYALS: Yes. Thank you. I came from a system that had all appointed trustees, so sometimes I forget about that role of the election.

>> Yes. Yes.

>> TONYA RYALS: Thank you. All right. Thank you. So we have just one minute. Does anyone have any other quick question or anything? We're good? Okay. Oh.

>> Did you say that Urban Libraries --

>> TONYA RYALS: Oh, yes, Urban Libraries Unite is right over there. So, yes, please stop by and visit them and grab some stuff from United. So thank you all. It was great to see you all in person, so thanks.

(Applause)