

Less Whining, More Dining: The Importance of Relationship Building in Library Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the author's application of Cheryl Stenström and Ken Haycock's research on library funding advocacy to two public libraries which he had directed. Their research had suggested the importance of relationship building. Based on this research, the author built relationships with funding authorities and found success; in one of his libraries, funding had increased by around 40% in two years, and proposed budget cuts at his other library were reversed.

Introduction

In 2016, I became director of the Wareham Free Library in Wareham, Massachusetts, a library with the dubious distinction of being "decertified." This title meant that Wareham had failed to meet state-level library standards, such as operating a minimum number of hours, a direct result of having suffered severe funding cuts. The library had become a shell of itself; about a decade earlier, when I had worked there as a page, it had been ranked 11th in the state in terms of programming, a notable accomplishment for a community of just around 20,000 persons. Now, it barely offered monthly programs. I had come aboard to try and turn things around, ultimately regaining certification.

The task seemed daunting. Trust between library supporters and town officials was very low; a few years earlier, the Board of Library Trustees and the town's governing body, the Board of Selectmen, had been involved in contentious litigation around ownership of the library's donation accounts. Town officials claimed that budget cuts were necessary given the town's woeful finances, and library supporters countered that the library had been unfairly targeted to "punish" residents for having failed to, in 2014, vote to "override" the town's property tax levy limit. After the tax measure's failure, the library's budget was swiftly halved.

To say the least, Wareham harbored a politically-charged atmosphere.

In preparing for this position, I had been researching evidence-based recommendations on reversing budget cuts. Many of the recommendations struck me as too hackneyed (e.g., sharing statistics about the library's value or initiating a letter writing campaign) or too aggressive (e.g., recruiting an outside firm to back a library-based ballot referendum). Besides, many of these recommendations had already been tried. It seemed unrealistic, for example, to muster adequate support behind a library referendum when the override vote

had failed. And, after starting the job, I quickly learned that library supporters had already tried aggressive tactics, threatening to “vote out” town officials who had consented to library cuts. In the end, the officials consented to the cuts and no one had been voted out of office; in fact, incumbents had easily won their next elections.

It all seemed quite hopeless until I discovered Cheryl Stenström and Ken Haycock’s (2015) research on evidence-based library advocacy. Their opening in *Public Libraries Online* might as well have been about Wareham: “. . . large-scale efforts in mobilizing angry patrons rarely result in a full reversal of the [funding cut], and likely make any future negotiations even more tense.”

Their work centers on Robert Cialdini’s framework of interpersonal influence, which posited six “tactics” for influencing decision makers. Stenström’s dissertation had analyzed a sample of Canadian funding authorities to find that Cialdini’s concept of “liking” was the most important tactic among the six. In this framework, “liking” means exactly what it says: the extent to which a funding authority likes the person requesting funding. Stenström posited that one way to improve “liking” might be through repeated exposure, that is, returning to the same funder not to pester them about the library’s budget, but to build a meaningful relationship in which both parties regard each other as valued colleagues. As Stenström writes (2012), “When decision makers considered funding for public libraries, this study showed they most often used three distinct lenses: the consistency lens (what are my values? what would my party do?), the authority lens (is someone with hierarchical power telling me to do this?) and most importantly, the liking lens (how much do I like and know about libraries and the requester?)” (p. 149).

Interesting research, I thought. Stenström studied this subject in her 2012 dissertation, and Haycock had enjoyed a long and storied career involving library advocacy. Surely these were people I should trust, at least over my own (likely to be wrong) instincts.

I have come to learn that municipal library directors must straddle two worlds: the library, with its concerns of patron privacy, service delivery, equitable access, and internal policies, and the municipality, with its almost rabid insistence on suppressing taxes. Municipal leaders may often sympathize with library concerns, but they must balance a budget in accordance with numerous departmental needs and voter preferences. Many American municipalities unwittingly cultivate an atmosphere of departmental competition; Sam Amdursky (2019) argued that all public libraries need to declare funding independence because “[w]hen public libraries compete for funds with police, fire, sewers, schools, planning, and assessor’s offices, they lose.” Municipal budgeting is a zero-sum game, since more money for the library means less money for the police department, and elected officials, as well as municipal administrators, keenly feel this “give and take.”

New library directors can underestimate this delicate tension. Many library directors often answer to a Board of Trustees, yet their department’s success ultimately relies on funding authorities. Directors can dream up as many suites of robust services as they wish, but if those services are not funded, then they are worth even less than the paper on which they had been printed. Although some public libraries’ funding is indeed independent, through some manner of dedicated levy/millage or large endowment, in many libraries, especially in New England, funding is controlled by a government body, be it a city council or finance committee.

So, having digested all of Stenström and Haycock’s published work, I decided to try and apply their findings. While all of Cialdini’s persuasive tactics seemed important (for example, I wanted to cultivate “authority” by appearing competent), “liking” appeared most within my control and had the largest empirical support in Stenström’s dissertation. I first had to identify who really controlled the town’s funding. I do not mean “controlled” by statute or charter; technically, the voters controlled the funding because they appropriated funds at the annual Town Meeting (in Wareham, as in many New England towns, budgets are passed at

Town Meetings by a majority of attending registered voters). One could say that the Finance Committee controlled the funding, because it was their budget which was sent to the Town Meeting, and voters rarely contested what they presented; one could also argue it was the Board of Selectmen, because they were the ones who appointed the Finance Committee members.

Yet after some months on the job, my observations coalesced on one figure so dominating and charismatic that I had yet to see anyone seriously disagree with his financial advice: the town administrator. Given his financial background and political skill, he was so well-respected that everyone more or less went along with him. The scant number of voters who attended Town Meeting were quite compliant, certainly on budgeting issues, and the elected officials almost always deferred to the town administrator's judgment. Yes, they disagreed with him on matters of governance, but when it came to the town's finances, they trusted – if not revered – his judgment.

I figured that the path to success lay through him. In Stenström and Haycock's language, I needed exposure, that is, I needed to be respected and liked by the town administrator, something which could happen after repeated meetings. I stopped spending so much time in the library working on routine administrative matters and instead visited town hall. The town administrator and I initially discussed library-related matters but eventually covered other subjects of mutual interest such as the school department and bond issuances. After several months, I no longer viewed these meetings as part of my job, or as an attempt to apply Stenström and Haycock's research; they felt more like spending time with a colleague and friend.

I stayed in Wareham for only two years, but in that time our budget increased by over 40%, which was notable given that I had begun the position with a warning that the library might permanently close due to budgetary constraints. Our success resulted from an unexpected windfall. Massachusetts had recently legalized the recreational purchase of marijuana, and the town administrator saw potential revenue. While surrounding municipalities decried the moral rot which had inspired such legislation, Wareham understood that opportunistic towns would profit off the change – and one of those towns might as well be Wareham. The town administrator negotiated a payment plan with a prospective vendor so that Wareham received, in addition to state-mandated sales tax proceeds, at least \$100,000 per year.

The question became where to allocate that money. Like many municipalities, Wareham has many underfunded departments: the police had not been fully staffed, or close to it, since the Great Recession; public works had only around a dozen workers to manage all of the town's roads, trees, and buildings, a drop of around 50% from a decade prior; and the town's funds employed only a part-time director at the senior center. The town administrator recommended that half of the marijuana revenue be sent to the school department, which was always in need, and the other half to the library, giving us the final push needed to regain state-level certification. These funds could have gone anywhere, but they went to the library.

From the Bay to the Ocean

I then went to direct the East Providence Public Library in East Providence, Rhode Island. East Providence was transitioning from a council-manager form of government to that of a strong mayor. After the inauguration, I immediately contacted the mayor in a bid to repeat my relationship building in Wareham. Yet, for reasons unrelated to this narrative, our professional relationship never really developed. Fortunately, and contrary to popular opinion in the city, the mayor was not the city's funding authority; that honor belonged to the five-person City Council, a body very independent from not only the mayor's authority but also his priorities.

I thus pivoted from courting the mayor to the City Council. I invited all of the Councilpersons to the library, and three of the five took me up on the offer. At these

meetings, we discussed their vision of the library and how we could serve their constituents better. I was pleased to find that my invitations had yielded more than political goodwill; we had brainstormed some promising ideas, such as having one Councilperson assist with a wellness clinic for our adult language learners. Afterward, I stayed in fairly regular contact with these Councilpersons, making it a point to attend non-political events they hosted, sponsored, or even just participated in (e.g., one might be a speaker at a flag raising event).

In August of 2020, I resigned from my position for family reasons. However, prior to my resignation, the mayor had submitted to the City Council a budget which had cut almost \$150,000 from the library, wiping out most of its materials and programming line items (East Providence's fiscal year begins in November, so budget negotiations begin in July). I had initially consented to some cuts, given the COVID-19 pandemic's colossal disruption. Shortly thereafter, however, I learned that other departments had not been cut at all, and, in fact, some had even received sizable increases.

After learning of this, I contacted the Councilpersons with whom I had established relationships. I argued that cutting the library made little sense when other departments, some of which were currently providing hardly any public service, went untouched. The Councilpersons agreed and pledged to restore the funding. And on the night they received the library's budget from the mayor, they did just that.

But Did This Really Matter?

Did my application of Stenström and Haycock's research engineer financial success? It sure sounds nice. In Wareham, more aggressive and bellicose tactics had failed to make headway. The relationship between the town and library had degenerated to a point where the town was considering, perhaps only half-seriously but dangerous even to consider, defunding the library altogether. With relationship building between me and the town's primary financial authority, we saw a dramatic turnaround. And in East Providence, proposed cuts were swiftly reversed after I had contacted my Councilpersons; from them, I had received vigorous support and decisive action.

But, in all honesty, who can really say? It's very possible that, regardless of who was director and how that person approached budgeting, Wareham's town administrator would have funded the library in order to regain certification. Even though the public had stopped agitating for it, certification was still an important end goal, and it only took \$100,000 or so to guarantee it. And perhaps the East Providence City Council would have still restored the library's budget; after all, the Councilpersons I worked with did not comprise some random sample of Councilpersons. They worked with me, in part, because they already supported library services.

So, with this type of $N=1$ example, it's hard to know whether my research-based approach helped. With that said, since Stenstrom and Haycock's publications, more research has come out supporting the value of relationship building. For example, Million and Bossaller (2020) surveyed state library associations, finding that respondents valued relationship building with legislators and policy-makers. Also published in this journal's pages, Michelle Boisvenue-Fox (2018) argued that "relationships matter in politics," relaying the story of Lance Werner, Library Journal's 2018 Librarian of the Year, whose consensus building led to much success for his library's millage. It is certainly an approach that makes good theoretical sense, i.e., we should expect it to work based on the importance of human relationships in every other domain, and it is also one which has at least some empirical support.

Concluding Thoughts

I applied Stenström and Haycock's research to two library systems in an attempt to increase funding and stave off cuts, namely by building relationships with local authorities. My takeaway advice for library directors would be to build relationships with funding

authorities in good or neutral times. You do not want to be in a position where you are unsure of how to approach proposed cuts to your library. You do not want to be reactive because by then it may be too late. You want to be in a position where the funding authority, whoever or whatever they are, likes you – yes, you, personally you – to such an extent that if the library does get cut then you can feel confident that it was unavoidable. Local funding authorities ultimately are people, not abstract bureaucracies which dispassionately manipulate spreadsheets. Their decisions affect themselves, their neighbors, their friends, and their voters. They are very real people, and you should approach them as such.

Or, to paraphrase Haycock in this YouTube video (2015): you need to do more wining and dining, and less whining.

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