8. Action Plan: Expect More

There is a saying that you shouldn't muster the troops without giving them marching orders. In other words, it is fine for me to tell you what to expect, but without an action plan to get you there it is only an exercise. You may recall that earlier in the book I said that bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, and great libraries build communities. This makes a pretty good outline for an action plan: what to do if you have a bad, good or great library.

Action Plan for Great Libraries

Some of you already have libraries and librarians that exceed your expectations. Wonderful. Your action plan is simple: support them. This is not just about money but also about letting them hear your voice and share your dreams, and taking ownership in the library itself. You need to spread the word that your library is alive and well and is more than what folks expect.

There are plenty of people out there who think the era of libraries has passed. I talked to one board member who loves his library, but said that every time he mentioned to someone that he was on the board he got a sympathetic "Aw, that's too bad." It happens to me all the time; It's one of the reasons I wrote this book. When people ask me what I do, "I'm a professor of library science," I say. "Oh," they say, "I love books, too," or

sometimes with less tact, "We still need libraries?" If we love our libraries and they support our needs, we should support them right back.

I believe that many of these less-than-supportive views of libraries come from interactions with libraries in the past that have set the bar too low. Eli Neiburger once said that for teens, the library is a net detractor of social capital. He would see teens at the library looking down at the floor and telling their parents they hoped they wouldn't be seen. The library wasn't cool, wasn't fun, wasn't helpful. However, Eli and the Ann Arbor District Library changed that. Eli started a gaming tournament at the library. It was co-organized by teens themselves. Once a month teens from around the area would compete for top rankings in games like *Mario Kart* for the Wii.

Eli went further than just having a room and a Wii. He would stream an ESPN-like show about the tournament out on public access TV and the web. Then at the end of the tournament he would post the result on the web. Suddenly he found teen boys flocking not only to the library for the tournament but to the website to show their friends how good they were. Gaming transformed the library from a net detractor to a net adder of social capital. He raised teens' expectations of the library, and the community rallied around to support it.

Why gaming in the library, by the way? Because, as a great librarian will tell you, gaming is central to the lives and learning of teens—and just about everyone else. Kids learn to read through games. Teens learn to solve problems through games. College students study to get jobs in the gaming industry. Adults use games to stay mentally active. Communities across the country have adopted gaming as a way to socialize (*Words with Friends*, anyone?), relax, and learn. Great libraries understand this; bad libraries think it's "Pizza, pizza, pizza, book!"

That line comes from a hilarious video that a group of librarians put together about getting college students into the library[109]. They created the video to make clear that learning isn't restricted to books. Having food in the library, or gaming, or knitting clubs, or people fabricating new parts on a MakerBot is not a method to lure in the public and then hit them up to check out books. These activities are ways of facilitating learning, not loss leader marketing to trick people into a visit to the library.

You should expect a great library to seek out innovative ways of supporting learning. A great library should provoke and prompt conversation. The librarians should expect you to engage in those conversations. They should expect you to question why something is part of a library, and you should expect them to come up with something more than "marketing" or "keeping up with what other libraries are doing."

---

[109] http://youtu.be/ibi7aTmVA_c (accessed December 8, 2015)

To be sure, great libraries require funding. You can't expect a great library to stay that way by cutting staff and replacing true librarians with clerks. However, you should expect a great library to earn and justify that cost. In the midst of the Great Depression, for example, the budget of the New York Public Library actually increased. Why? Because the city saw great value in how the library reached out to a community in need and offered services like education, job retraining, and a suite of social services.

Action Plan for Bad Libraries

Let me be very clear. What makes a library bad is not its collections. Bad libraries can have huge collections or small ones. Great libraries can also have large or small (or no) collections. However, bad libraries see the collection as the materials they buy and lease. Great libraries see the community itself as the collection. There is fantastic value in loads of books and reams of journal articles, but how much more rich and varied and powerful is the community itself?

The true collection is in grandparents, teachers, and students. In the public sphere the community-collection consists of children whose imaginations are unencumbered by the day-to-day realities of the workplace. It is also seniors. The past century has seen the expected lifespan of an American go from 47 to 77. Imagine that vast sea of experience and unbridled talent seeking not profit but a legacy.

In schools, the true collection does not sit on shelves but in the classroom: the honest effort of the learner, the wisdom and patience of teachers. A school community—from nurses and art teachers to athletes and coaches to administrators and parents—is a rich collection indeed.

In universities, where the focus is on discovering new knowledge and preparing the next workforce, the collection spans the institution. There, the scholar is unlocking the mysteries of the universe and the lecturer is making those secrets accessible to students. The collection extends to alumni and funders and groundskeepers, all struggling to push society's knowledge to new heights.

What collection of books or magazines in a corporate setting could rival the knowledge of engineers or lawyers or doctors?

The community is the true collection, and bad libraries need to spend a lot less time on collections of books and a lot more time on connections within the community. A bad library talks about building collections for the next generation; a great library understands that the value it delivers is a community's appreciation of heritage and aspirations for a legacy. Bad libraries seek to build connections between items, and great libraries build links between people.

It is not the shape or state of the building (or room) that constitutes a bad library. There is a fantastic library at the heart of the U.S. Embassy in Rome that is little more than a set of desks, yet effectively serves diplomats all around Italy and the world. I have been in fabulous library buildings where the very architecture oozes intellect and a temple-like reverence—yet they are nearly empty because the community doesn't even know they exist.

A bad library will use the building as an excuse. The case will be made that the public/students/professionals will flock to the library with better parking or a bigger set of book stacks. And that is true. For weeks after a new building opens it will be filled with the curious. However, it is ultimately the services, professionals, and co-ownership that will bring people back. You build a new library when the old one is too small to accommodate the community, not when it is too small to accommodate the stuff.

I was on a public library board. The central library had been moved from an older Carnegie building to a new downtown shopping mall some years ago. It was part of the county's attempt to get community members to come back to downtown. By the time I joined the board a decade or so later, the mall was in pretty bad shape and the number of visits to the library was declining. The director at the time, who had come in well after the move, kept talking about a lack of parking, even though the parking garage below the mall had more space than the old Carnegie building had. The director said the decline in use was because there was no off-street access to the library—folks had to go into the mall and up an elevator to find the library.

The deputy county executive who had been instrumental in moving the library had heard enough. The next board meeting, he brought in poster-sized charts showing an increase in library use after the move. He then showed how the decrease in library services and budget during a recession had been the reason for the initial decline in use. He made it clear that there had been no subsequent recovery of visits once the economy had improved after the new library director had arrived. It was a rather startling reminder that expecting more of a library includes expecting better use of data and getting past excuses.

This is all fine and good, but how do you turn things around? First, realize that people love libraries, even bad ones. For some community members the thought that there are "bad" libraries is a sort of assault. All around, libraries are being loved to death. People believe in libraries but don't use them. Or they use them but don't challenge them to be better, or to even justify their work. One large urban public library I worked with ran over 20,000 programs a year. These included story hours for kids, and lecture series with world famous authors. Why 20,000? Would 10,000 have had the same impact? How many people benefited from these programs? How do they know? What held these programs together as a sort of theme or tied them to the library's mission?

As a community member you must, in the words of Saint Paul, "test everything; retain what is good."[110] To question something is not to assume something is bad, but to test its fitness. We would be horrified if we went to the doctor and she used leeches to bleed us when we had the flu. Tools change, methods change, and yet the profession, mission, and values endure. Asking why a library offers reference services, or why its collection budget needs to be increased, or about the impact of a story hour is not out of bounds. Great libraries welcome the questions because they are a chance to show value.

So here is your game plan for turning around a bad library.

Educate yourself

This book is short; it was written for busy people. I've tried to point to more information on the examples and ideas presented here. Follow up. Look for great libraries, not to copy, but for inspiration. There are great libraries and librarians out there, and the great thing about them is that—as a by-product of maintaining constant and sustained conversation with their communities—a lot of their work is easily visible and well documented.

Play

As I have said, every community is unique, and a great library does not simply take a service from another library and put it in place without considering local conditions. Also realize that great libraries play. Staff are given time to experiment and try out new ideas. Some libraries have surfing days when staff get together, surf the web, and shout out great new tools and links for others to try. You should expect librarians to try out the latest web service, if only to peek at it. Good libraries do this too, but great libraries invite the public to join in.

The DOK library in Delft, Netherlands, is world famous for being one of, if not the most, innovative library in the world. Its librarians regularly use the space to host art exhibitions and interactive technology petting zoos. Other libraries are partnering with electronics retailers like Best Buy to bring in the latest and greatest toys for the librarians and community members to try.

The Syracuse University Library put on a series of teaching tools events where, for a day, faculty, students, and librarians came to look at new methods of teaching and new educational tools. It wasn't a series of hour-long lectures and demos. Instead faculty and staff formed small groups where they tried the techniques and shared notes. Great librarians are not afraid to show they are learning, too; they are not afraid to learn from others, even if

---

[110] 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

they are learning from a nine-year-old. And here is an essential point: ***great libraries come from great librarians***.

Great librarians experiment with new services and are not afraid to fail rapidly. There is a difference between a failure and a mistake. A mistake is when you do something wrong and don't learn from it (so you often repeat it). A failure is something you try that is a little bit beyond your reach, but you can figure out how to do it better next time. If your librarians are not trying new things and pushing the boundaries, or are afraid to try something because they might fail—they are afraid of learning (or worse, victims of bad management that rewards only success and not learning).

If every new thing a library does, no matter how big (starting a gaming program) or small (accepting canned foods in place of fines), happens only after the formation of a committee and a three-month planning process, then you are killing innovation and your library is not about learning and playing.

Benchmark

All that said, there is a time when play must end and experiments must transform from experiments to reliable services. This requires knowing what impact or outcomes you want the service to have. These outcomes are agreements between the library and the community. Does a service need a certain number of uses to justify it? Is it more important to build the library's reputation externally for this service? Good hard play leads to realistic and authentic benchmarks. These benchmarks need to make sense to the community and need to be available for review by the community as well.

Please note, however, that benchmark is not equivalent to numbers and statistics. Benchmarks must be negotiated and meaningful. Librarians and community members must set a desired outcome, then seek a common understanding of what evidence will demonstrate that outcome. That may be a number (people in the library), but it could also be the collected stories of the community, or consensus from focus groups, or a product of observing interactions in libraries and other community spaces. The bottom line here is that there are no longer standard numbers that describe a great library. Visits to the library may mean nothing is the outcome sought is great learning in people's homes. Circulation of items may mean nothing when libraries provide on-site access to 3D printers, musical instruments, or looms. Great libraries and great communities seek impact, not numbers.

Trust your expertise (but be open)

You shouldn't have to become a librarian to understand the value a library provides. Expect your librarians to bridge the gap between their world and yours. There is an old line I use that goes, "The techies never say no—instead they throw technobabble at you until you go away." ("Well, I would load that software on your machine, but then I'd have to make an exception

to the firewall to allow for the https connection or tunnel through the VPN to check the code signature…") Librarians can match the IT folk, acronym for acronym. ("Well I could fix the spelling of your last name on the MARC record, but then I'd have to propagate it through our whole cataloging module of the ILS, and send it up to OCLC to match against the authority list maintained by LC…)

I have seen change-resistant librarians completely stop a very smart board member with this technique. The member wanted to know why cookbooks were in the same place as the books on business. It wasn't just odd, it was downright annoying to be in the middle of a consultation with a librarian on business plans and tax codes only to be interrupted by someone looking for a lemon pie recipe. The answer she got was, "They are together in the Dewey Decimal System," which was true at the time the books were shelved. Why? Because Dewey saw home economics and cookery (his term for cooking) as the female equivalent of business…did I mention Dewey was a misogynist?

So case closed, right? Well, not really. Even though the Dewey numbers go together, there is nothing that says the books have to. You can put the cookbooks wherever you damn well please, so long as folks can find them. Even Dewey would have said that.

You are the expert on your needs and you have expertise in your community. Trust that. If something doesn't seem to make sense, ask. If you get an answer that doesn't make sense, ask again (and again). Libraries are there to make you smarter, so when they make you feel dumb, something is wrong.

Now just as the value of play has to be matched with the rigor of benchmarks, so, too, does your personal view need to be open to the views of others. As I've said, communities are rich and multifaceted places. Often times there are conflicts between what one group wants and another group needs. A good library helps mediate this difference and find common ground. Take the Freegal service I mentioned before (downloading MP3 files for personal use at taxpayer expense). I know a lot of great libraries that offer the service. They offer it even though they don't believe it is the best value for the community. They offer the service because the community made an informed decision and feels that, while the benefit may be limited to the community as whole, the value that the smaller population receives translates into more resources and support for other library services.

Visit

I have yet to find a great librarian who doesn't like to show off a bit. They are born teachers, and their service ethic means that if they can share something to help you, they will. Take the time to travel and see other libraries. Get ideas, see what works, talk to the librarians and the community

in the library. But make sure you talk to the librarians. What you want to get out of the visit is not just a sense of the architecture and how busy a library is, but the decisions and process that lead to that situation.

For example, there is something called virtual reference in libraries. Through the web, you can ask librarians questions, and those librarians, either in real time or through email, will help you find the answer. Several years ago it was a new thing in libraries and so there were conferences and there was some peer pressure to start up a service.

At one of these conferences I talked with a librarian and asked her what her library did about virtual reference. Somewhat sheepishly, she said that her library didn't do virtual reference. I asked her to describe her library to me. "It is a small all-women's college in the Northeast. It is the kind of place where at 9 o'clock at night the students walk the 20 feet from their dorms to the library in their PJs to study."

I said to her, "Don't ever offer virtual reference." At the time the common wisdom was to offer virtual reference, but here the librarian saw past the peer pressure to the community need.

I know it may be asking a lot of you to study up on libraries. Well, if you have made it this far in the book, you probably are already inclined to do so, but still, why bother going out and seeing other libraries? Because part of being human is that we are very bad at describing what we want without referencing something we already know. It is how we build knowledge; we scaffold new discoveries upon the top of what we already know. The richer that foundation, the richer the knowledge.

This was brought home to me quite eloquently by Cindy Granell, an elementary school librarian, when she talked about what her board of education knew about elementary school libraries. This is what she told me. The average age of school board members in the States is between 40 and 59.[111] Take those 40-year-old school board members. Do a little math, and you realize the last time they used an elementary school library was in the 1980s…before the web and before most people had personal computers (and when the average cost of a PC was approaching $4,000). Back then, school libraries were places where books were the core tool librarians had to work with. Today, school library curriculum includes cyberbullying, finding credible information, how to search in databases, and research skills, among other things. In an iPad age when every new TV comes with a Facebook app, these librarians have 18 hours a year (30 minutes once a week) to help kids become both good readers and effective participants in the knowledge infrastructure. If these board members never step foot in the library, how would they know that?

---

[111] In Middle Township, 'age is no barrier to leadership.' (2007, January 18). *New Jersey's School Board Recognition, 30*(21). Retrieved from http://www.njsba.org/sb_notes/20070118/recog.html (accessed December 8, 2015)

This is not just a school issue either. Study after study shows that the primary influence for new scholars' use of information technology and information resources is their mentor or primary advisor. That means that most scholars are at least one generation removed from current practice. Without actively going out and seeing what is available today, how do today's new scholars know how much better it could be?

Create Forums

One of the funniest (in a sad sort of way) things I have seen in a library came when students protested the off-site storage plan Syracuse University had proposed. Graduate students congregated in the first floor of the library ready to hand out angry missives about the library…except they didn't bring enough copies. So the librarians helped them make the copies. The students sought signatures for a petition. The librarians suggested they could do the petition online as well and showed the students how. When the protestors got hungry, the librarians directed them to the café in the library.

Now this wasn't actually the librarians joining in the protest; they disagreed pretty fundamentally. But the librarians knew their mission was not to shut down the conversation, but to facilitate it…so they did. To be sure, they also pitched their case to the protestors (like the commons space they were against was the same space they were now using to protest). But they welcomed the conversation and were professionals who did their jobs.

How do you interact with your library? Does the library have a comment card box? What happens with the cards? Who sees them? Just the librarians? Does the library hold focus groups? Do they have open board meetings that you actually know about before the fact? Does the library have a series of advisory boards? It always amazes me that public librarians wonder why more teens never come to the library when the library never felt it important to put a teen on the board, or at least on a board for teen services. Does your library have a brownbag series where librarians and the community can gather to listen to speakers (in person or online) and then talk about it? How many times have you sat down with a librarian in your office?

Ask to see your library's "conversation plan." They will probably say they don't know what that is because I just made up the phrase. But it will be a great departure point for talking about how the library formally, regularly, and in an assessable way talks to the community. This is **not** a marketing plan that speaks to letting the community know what the library is up to. You should expect librarians to have a list of outreach partners (academic departments, the Chamber of Commerce, etc.). There should be a sense of a schedule for checking in with these partners.

A great example of this sort of planned communications was an academic library director who visited each college in the university every year at budget development time. He brought with him his budget targets and a

list of journals and databases the library purchased each year with the associated cost. He then went through the list with the department's faculty, asking what he should keep and what he should cut. The colleges felt as if they were part of the process and saw direct value from the library.

Compare this to another college I worked with as a consultant. The library formed an advisory group of faculty from the different colleges. The sociologist of the group started talking about how it was unfair that the library was spending so much money on the physical sciences, and not enough on the social sciences. The physicist in the group quickly chimed in that he was surprised to hear that, as he always thought the library was ignoring the physical sciences for the social sciences. This library, by not including the community in decision-making, had not only pitted everyone against each other, but had managed to make all of them feel slighted! Co-ownership demands both transparency of decision-making, and power in those decisions. All of this rests upon having an ongoing and facilitated forum for conversational exchange and goal setting for the library.

Map the Conversation

The most effective way of seeing the relationship to the community is not through a list of services or a list of collections. It is not seen in a string of statistics or in strategic plans. It is in the conversations the library chooses to engage in and support.

You should expect your library to work with the community to identify a list of key stakeholders or sub-communities that the library can or should help. In a college, this might be faculty, students, administration, and staff. In a school, it might be teachers, students, and administration. It can be more specific. For example, in my work with a law firm we identified lawyers as a major group, but it was helpful to further break this group down into criminal and civil divisions, and even further into environmental lawyers, civil rights, tax, and so on. The level of resolution can change as the engagement with these groups increases.

Once you have identified these key stakeholders, you need to identify the conversations/problems/aspirations within the groups. So faculty are talking about curriculum development, the Latino population is talking about economic development, etc. Next, map any regularity to these conversations. For example, administrators in a school district have a predictable timetable to develop a budget with state-mandated forums and milestones. Working with a representative group from the community and the library, prioritize these conversations. Which ones can the library help with the most? Which ones should the library be a part of?

Lastly, lay out the services offered by the library and librarians. Try and connect the services to the conversations. Are there services with connections? Are there parts of important conversations with no services?

Why? This is a way of embedding library service in the community, not simply identifying what the library does well (or at least does already) and making the most of it. Remember, the mission of the library is to improve society, not maximize the use of services it already offers. Libraries facilitate knowledge creation; they don't wring the value out of collections.[112]

Action Plan for Good Libraries

And what about those libraries that fall in the middle? The difference between a good library and a great library can be subtle. There are some very good libraries out there. These libraries are dedicated to making you happy and serving your needs. They have the latest in materials (books, DVDs, journal articles, etc.). Their websites are well organized and functional. They prize customer service and they get you what you need. They tend to collect a lot of data on the community and have active marketing. Many communities feel these libraries are meeting their expectations.

But if you want to see the difference between a good library and a great one, try visiting a Borders bookstore or a Blockbuster video store. You can't. They don't exist anymore. And when they closed, the only signs you saw were advertising clearance sales and deep discounts. But you know what signs you see when they try and close a great library? Signs of protest. You see picket lines. You see angry town hall meetings. Why? Well, that takes us back to the very first chapter. The reason why is because the library is part of the community. It is not a set of comfy chairs and an excellent collection. It is a symbol, and a friend, and a teacher.

But let's be honest. Some libraries close with nary a whisper. Academic library budgets are downsized and corporations close their libraries. They close bad libraries, yes, but they also close good libraries. The difference between good and great comes down to this: a library that seeks to serve your community is good, and a library that seeks to inspire your community to be better every day is great. You can love a good library, but you need a great library.

When you limit your expectations of a library to a supplier for your consumption, the library is in direct competition with the likes of Amazon and Google. But if you expect more—if you expect your library to be an advocate for you in the complex knowledge infrastructure—if you expect your library to be a center of learning and innovation—if you expect your library to help you create knowledge and not simply get you easy access to the work of others—if you expect your librarians to be personally concerned with your success—if you expect the library to be a third place that glues together a community—if you expect your library to inspire you, to challenge you, to

---

[112] The process of mapping community conversations is covered in greater depth in the *Atlas of New Librarianship*.

provoke you, but always to respect you beyond your means to pay—then you expect a great library. You deserve a great library. Go out and get it!