

## BREAKING GROUND IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CONNECTING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

by Jim Fleck

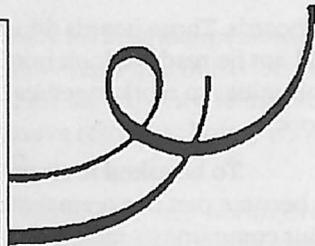


The headlines in our newspaper read "Library Breaks Ground for New Building." Our local library was beginning the construction of a new \$5 million dollar library facility. As president of our board of trustees, I reflected on that headline and my first thoughts were of great satisfaction and accomplishment and connection. As I thought about this headline a little more, I realized that the headline was really old news that the newspaper was only now revealing in a different form.

In a real sense we as a library board of trustees had begun breaking ground for the new library facility more than five years before. At that time most observers, including me, considered the building project an impossibility in our community. Out of compliance with the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA), we also faced additional barriers, both physical and mental. Our library did not have adequate resources for a sound budget, let alone a building project. Responses to the board showed little understanding by most of the public in our community about what a modern library really is or why we even need a library. We heard: "Since we now have the home computer, the modern bookstores, and the video stores, we don't need the library anymore."

Beyond these challenges significant geographical areas served by the school district in which we were located were unserved by our library. To survive we had just reorganized from a Class II library to a Class I library to meet the economic pressures consuming us, so were a brand new library district addressing the differences that brought to our service. The changes to the new district created taxpayer backlash and diluted support. Some threatened us with a possible law suit to dissolve the district. During this time I felt like Forest Gump eating a box of chocolates.

The appropriate question at the beginning of each Board of Trustees meeting should have been, "Are we having fun yet?" During those five years of challenges, indecisions, and decisions the board of trustees broke much ground. We had to break ground both inside the library and outside if we were to survive. Reflection on our recent past helped me gain insights about the future. It occurred to me that we dealt with many of the same issues that all libraries and all boards of trustees will face in the next ten years. Foremost among those issues was the continuing question: What do trustees and libraries in the twenty-first



century need to do to connect with and stay connected to their communities? Addressing that question is the focus of this article.

Library leaders must face many leadership questions at each of your monthly trustees' meetings. In addition, trustees encounter major decisions periodically throughout each year. Those decisions usually relate to the relationships the library has with the community. I think the biggest challenge that libraries will face during the first years of the twenty-first century will be how to connect with and stay connected to the community. To answer the connected issue each board of trustees must address the following two questions:

- 1) Who is the library in your community?
- 2) How do we increase the trust the community has for the library?

### WHO IS THE LIBRARY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

As library leaders trustees must ask what is important for your library to be? What is important for your library to do? What services matter at your library? Those "what" questions are essential to ask if you want to connect to your community. Nevertheless, trustees must also ask: "Who is the library?"

My research and experience confirm that each trustee brings to leadership his or her ideas and beliefs of what the library was, is and should be in the community. The "what" questions are important because they really force the leadership to identify "who the library is." In the twenty-first century our society will have much more information than any individual or group can ever deal with. People in your community must see the library as much more than a place, a depository, a warehouse, and another information outlet. The library must have a discernable vibrant identity.

People in communities relate to their experiences at their local library as "who the library is." Although the library is an institution with hundreds of years of history, most people in the community see it only in the "past personal." Individuals who use the library relate to the staff, to the products, and to their experiences in the library. They do it only from their own experiences. To them the library in a large sense is a "who" that provides something. Until we as leaders understand how people connect to the library

and why it is important to them, making connections will be difficult.

Stop just a second. SO WHAT? It all deals with relevancy. If trustees want their library seen as a relevant, viable, worthwhile public institution, leaders must have a clear vibrant identity. Seeing is believing and the opposite also applies. Is your library going to be seen as a place to get books and information? A place for Internet access and technology solutions? A reference center for problem solving? A cultural center for the community? An education center for young and old? A babysitting service with built in stories? A recreation experience? A quiet place for contemplation? Or an active place where activities are causing a buzz and the sound of laughter is allowed? As trustees intentionally think about a relevant identity, the leaders must also ask: "Does the library want the community to see it as more than just a place?" What will your library persona be?

Until trustees discuss and resolve the issues of identity with each of the other trustees there will be a vagueness that will permeate everything your library does. The library board needs to have some shared sense of what the unique purpose of the library is now and will be in the twenty-first century. Trustees must first establish an identity they understand. Then the library can develop an identity the public understands.

As I have worked with libraries across the country, experience has taught me that there is a recurring pattern of behavior that seems to exist in public institutions throughout our society. This is a notion that I call the "identity circle." It goes something like this: The more muddled the identity of your library, the more difficult it will be for your library to meet the expectations of the public. The more difficult it is to meet the public expectations, the more difficult it will be to get funding to support your library programs. The more difficult it is to get funding, the more muddled things become for the library.

On the other hand, the more clear the identity is to the library leadership, the easier it is to inform the public what they can expect from their library. The clearer the public perception is the more realistic the expectations are. The more realistic the expectations the better the support becomes for the library. The better the public support is, the better the financial support is as the library changes. The challenge is to make sure the trustees and your library are using the right circle.

It is the responsibility of the board to work through the difficult task of creating a worthwhile relevant identity. To do this the Board of Trustees and other essential people such as staff and community leaders need to develop a safe forum where dialogue can occur and they can reach a consensus.

## WHAT CAN TRUSTEES DO TO CREATE A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IDENTITY?

1. I think the best way to discover your library identity is to begin by holding a retreat. If a retreat is not possible, find an extended time in which the board members and staff can thoroughly and openly discuss these issues:

-Who the library is;

-What is important to maintain who the library is;

-What must be the character of the library in the future if it is to thrive at being who it is.

Although this takes some initial time investment and participation energy from the board and staff, it will save enormous frustration, conflict and resources in the end. Failure to resolve the identity issue is very risky if your library wants to connect with the community.

2. The library then needs to develop a shared values statement that expresses the identity of "Our Library" to the community. This task is not a once event. Building a values statement is a process of continual change. The product is not a document but a tool for ongoing clarification and understanding. It is not a mission statement. It is a discernment of character, behavior, and beliefs of what counts for the library to be "who" it is in a rapidly changing environment.

3. The library leadership must strategically find ways to communicate your identity to your community often. Connection is not static. It is elastic. In order for the library to stay connected it must continuously relate its uniqueness in a cluttered world. It is only when trustees think the community is beginning to see who the library is that the job of being a trustee really becomes exciting.

## HOW DO TRUSTEES INCREASE THE TRUST LEVEL THE COMMUNITY HAS FOR YOUR LIBRARY?

So, the community knows who the library is, so what? This does not alone guarantee positive connectivity. The next issue that we need to address as we enter the twenty-first century is trust. As change accelerates it seems that trust for the viability of all public institutions, including libraries, decreases. The headlines in many publications are reflecting the failures of the government or the public sector organizations in meeting current needs. Or, the cry is that the institution is no longer relevant. Or the accusations fly about that the organization is not ethical in the way it is approaching its mission. It seems that as a society in supersonic change we are becoming more suspicious and cynical and that reduces the connection we feel for all organizations who hope to serve.

*"The library must have a discernable vibrant identity."*

Loyalty to institutions, organizations and businesses is on the wane. Individual choices are now so great individuals have trouble trusting even their own judgment in the choosing. People seem to have this ever pervasive feeling that they can't get what they want, need and must have to live successfully in their future, whatever that is for them. This elusive feeling is in part explained by the idea of trust. The amounts of trust individuals have toward a person or institution often determines how much support or non-support they will give.

The library is not immune to feelings and perceptions of trust and distrust. If the community does not trust that the library is relevant, needed, or doing a good (no, great) job then the support for the library will evaporate. The arrival of technological change can lead to the public perception that we don't need a library to provide the information for the people in your community. The bookstores, computer outlets, the multimedia events are providing choices that affect the public perception of your library's relevance. Libraries must continuously nurture trust if community support is to increase.

It is the task of the Board of Trustees to lead the way in bridging the gap between "who the library is" and what the community thinks it is. Even the name "trustee" infers that trust building is your fundamental task.

### **WHAT CAN YOUR LIBRARY DO TO INCREASE THE TRUST THE COMMUNITY HAS FOR YOUR LIBRARY?**

1. Provide opportunities for patrons to share their ideas and needs concerning the library with the library leadership. This can be done through using focus groups, brainstorming sessions, information sharing evenings, and coffee hours. These times are great opportunities to have meaningful conversations that will help connect the library to the community. Not only will library leaders have the opportunity to capture the ideas from what community members say, the leaders will have the opportunity to reflect on what the community does not say which is just as important.

2. Provide similar sharing opportunities for those who are not patrons of the library. Here trustees have the opportunity to introduce these constituents to library services and enlist the reasons why they don't use the facility. Also, these people are not frozen into a particular paradigm of what a library needs to be doing. This insightful perspective allows some creative innovations that may be simple and inexpensive.

3. Hold some brief planning sessions with the community leaders by inviting them to attend your meetings. Using the philosophy that many are called but few are chosen, the library leadership can ask selected community

leaders to help plan ways to address the multitude of challenges that your library will face. By asking for specific advice and by not overburdening community leaders, cooperation and trust develop as a natural consequence. If trustees ask for the community's help in small ways, the community leaders help the library in big ways when the library needs them later.

4. Develop surveys directed to verify certain beliefs and suspicions that the library leaders have with respect to your services, your access, your circulation policies, your programs, your education offerings, your space use, your customer service, and those other subjects that are critical to staying connected to your community. Surveys can be either useful or a hindrance to your decision making. Before

taking the survey determine what the library really wants from the survey. Think through the specific purposes for the survey before spending the time and energy of the library people and the public. Some possible questions you might ask yourself in developing your survey are: Do you want information? If so, what kind? From exactly whom? What does the library plan to do with the information once it has it? Do you want merely to get new ideas and connect with the patrons? Do you want to enlist a source of volunteers? Do you want to use it for public relations purposes?

5. Do public relations programs. Spend some time, talent and money and create a public relations program that a library trustee can use in promoting the library. Prepare a visual presentation that library trustees can give to service clubs, social clubs, literary groups, governmental agencies and funding groups and any other groups that the library leaders think might need educating. Then develop a list of where the library leaders will give these presentations and then go do it. The enthusiasm and response from those presentations is what connecting is all about. As the public hears what the library people are trying to do at the library they will decide in new ways how they can connect to the library.

6. Create a media campaign. It does not matter if your library is a small library or if it is a large library in a large metropolitan community. Get exposure. Get noticed. Get the attention of the public. Write articles for the newspaper, trade journals, organization newsletters, or the neighborhood weekly. Take photographs and supply them to the print media. Do interviews on radio and television. Produce public service announcements. Buy advertisements for exposure. Do a strategic campaign that will help the community see that the library is alive, well and able to serve their needs in this rapidly changing environment. As a Board of Trustees this campaign is not just something your library should do if it has extra money. It is absolutely essential to your existence during

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this information industry revolution. It is no longer just a staff project. If the library is to develop ongoing trust with the public, trustees must be part of the team that helps get the exposure to develop that trust.

Reflecting on the headline and the role that our library's board played in this building project I realize we did more than five years of ground breaking. One way or another we did all of the activities that have been suggested in this article. Which of those activities worked so that we could realize our dream? I am not really certain which single activity did it. As I continued to reflect on the library ground breaking, I realized that—if there are to be continued connections—the twenty-first century library is going to demand from all library boards of trustees an increased level of participation within their communities.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jim Fleck, Fleck Leadership Center, is a nationally known speaker/facilitator who has published books on market planning, communications and customer service. Fleck is also President of the Board of Trustees of the Peabody Public Library in Columbia City, Indiana, and President-Elect of the Indiana Library Trustee Association.