
THREE STORIES:

Inclusion-centered Leadership in Action



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“Get ready to get uncomfortable. Get ready to look at a different point of view, a different perspective. Get ready to think differently.”

– a *Serving Communities* library director



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“...Serving Communities Framework and Curriculum helped me focus on a path that serves the community best, [to improve services] to portions of the community that I am not already serving, that we could really expand our service and really incorporate services to underserved communities and people.”

— a *Serving Communities* library director



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SERVING COMMUNITIES CURRICULUM

Overview

The *Serving Communities Curriculum* seeks, for you and your library staff, to:

1. enhance state, public, and county library leadership skills and competencies to intentionally plan for and provide equitable, culturally-responsive library services and resources for all members of the community with special focus on underserved community members that are not currently using the library; and
2. foster the co-development of these services and resources in partnership with government, community leaders, and organizations dedicated to addressing community issues affecting the lives of all community members.

The *Serving Communities Curriculum*, the *Serving Communities Framework*, and the *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library* are the result of a two-year program funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (imls.gov). Together, these materials provide library directors and leadership staff with the information they need to be actively aware and purposeful in co-creating equitable culturally-responsive library services and programs with vulnerable, underserved community member groups. A focus is on presenting actionable science information that is meaningful to adult learners in the community. (These materials are online at www.webjunction.org and www.cornerstonesofscience.org.)

Actionable Science-based Community Issues

As you consider the *Serving Communities Framework*, *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library* and the supporting modules, all of these materials are designed to help you be actively aware and purposeful for creating equitable access to actionable science information and services responsive to community needs, particularly to underserved communities who do not or are unable to access your library. To succeed at broadening community participation, an inclusion-centered library leader needs to also broaden their skills, attitudes and practices. This includes:

1. developing a shared language with community member groups;
2. knowing your audience and understanding their reticence to the library and their distrust of “science;” and

3. even within the library’s financial and staff constraints, through partnerships, willingness and interest, prioritizing equitable access to actionable science information and services that are relevant and needed by community member groups.

*“The **Framework** is a self-assessment tool. You are able to determine where you are and chart a path for personal improvements.”*

– a *Serving Communities* library director

Serving Communities Framework for Library Directors

The *Serving Communities Framework* for library directors is a resource for state, public, and county library directors and leadership staff. It supports your work to:

1. determine your current inclusion-centered attitudes and practices;
2. visualize your aspirations for yourselves (as inclusion-centered leaders), your library, and your community; and
3. develop your path forward for creating a more inclusion-centered library.

The *Serving Communities Framework* identifies the skills and competencies that library directors need to create a library that is responsive to community well-being (especially for people that are underserved). Library leaders need to be confident and have the skills to build a coalition of community members that is able to co-create actionable science-based programs and services for adult learners that are relevant and needed by them.

Supporting the *Serving Communities Framework* are five modules designed to enhanced your inclusion-centered skills, attitudes, and practices. They include:

Module 1: Personal Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices Module

Module 2: Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module

Module 3: Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Module 4: Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Community Member Experiences Module: Actionable Science Information for Adult Learners

Module 5: Creating a Shared Language Module: Putting the Glossary for an Inclusive Library into Action

SERVING COMMUNITIES

A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSION-CENTERED LIBRARY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT





Serving Communities: Inclusion-centered Library Leadership Development

Inclusion-centered leadership requires intentional internal organization practices that result in the delivery of library programs and services to all members of a community. Library leadership integrates their lived experiences and sphere of influence to make operational decisions that produces equitable access to library resources for all.

WHY

Between 2021 and 2023, the *Serving Communities: Inclusion-centered Library Leadership Development* program (RE-250085-OLS-21) focused on creating an inclusion-centered leadership model and framework that was field-tested by ten pilot libraries (specifically, library directors and leadership teams) from across the nation. The guiding premise of the project is that library directors, in collaboration with library staff and board members, local partners including government representatives, and diverse members of the community, can broaden the participation of adult learners, particularly those from marginalized populations, resulting in increased access to actionable science services and programs.

WHAT

The *Serving Communities: A Framework for Inclusion-centered Library Leadership Development (Serving Communities Framework)* is a tool that enables directors like you to assess your inclusion-centered leadership attitudes and practices. You can use it to benchmark your current and/or aspirational status and practice against future goals. Additional project professional development materials include the *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library* which draws directly from numerous tested resources and thought leaders within the informal science, library, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice communities. The definitions used in the *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library* are based on:

1. current use in library and government lexicons;
2. research and professional development usage;
3. current cultural, geographic and regional perspectives; and,
4. the development and implementation of the *Serving Communities: Inclusion-centered Library Leadership Development* project. The *Serving Communities Framework*, *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library* and professional development materials are available through Cornerstones of Science and WebJunction.

INTRODUCTION

WHO

These materials can be used either individually or by teams to build personal or staff inclusion-centered leadership attitudes and practices. Also, the *Serving Communities* materials provide the tools and strategies to help you and your staff build the relationships with community partners and members needed to co-create inclusive science-based actionable resources, library services and programs that communities indicate they want and need.

Three Stories: Inclusion-centered Leadership in Action

What is both challenging and exciting about intentional cultural change efforts is that they are carried out by real people. People who can be intuitive, smart, sensitive, adaptive, visionary, collaborative, honorable and so much more, while also being stubborn, scared, and intractable. They are required to operate within larger contexts where they are required to respond to myriad supports and barriers. The *Three Stories: Inclusion-centered Leadership in Action* highlights the leadership lessons learned and the reflections of three senior library leaders and key partners in their work as they strive to create sustainable inclusion-centered libraries.

Context

The *Serving Communities: Inclusion-centered Library Leadership Development* program (2021-2023) took place during a time of culture wars and the unprecedented historical impacts of COVID-19, directly affecting the library community as a whole. It was in this aftermath, when the library community was trying to catch its breath and beginning to re-set normal operations within their communities, that these three interviews with library leaders located at different libraries across the United States took place. In order to fully appreciate and understand the *Three Stories*, it is important to understand this context and its potential impact. In the case of research that uses a qualitative approach such as interviews, taking context into account as part of the analysis sheds additional light on the decisions, constraints, supports, and outcomes reported by those being interviewed.

Prevailing Culture Wars

At the time these interviews were conducted, libraries and their staff were, and still are, at the front lines of the culture wars occurring in the United States. These leaders and partners are committed to actualizing their library missions that focus on priorities common to most public libraries: to support intellectual freedom; enrich communities through access to knowledge; foster lifelong learning; and provide a

range of information, tools, and materials to support the diverse needs of community members. However, this is happening during a time of intense scrutiny, book banning and censorship, as well as different ethnic and cultural groups feeling unsafe and discriminated against within the communities in which they live. The impact on librarians is direct and personal. For example, “In Idaho, a librarian resigned last fall after a bullying campaign that included armed men standing in the back of board meetings. At a public library in East Texas, a patron made a video of a uniformed officer behind the circulation desk sorting through frequently challenged books. A librarian in Louisiana who received a death threat after opposing censorship said she installed a home-security system, bought a Taser and sleeps ‘with a shotgun under my bed.’” In response, the American Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Office issued a statement opposing initiatives to censor information resources, curricula, and programs addressing racial injustice, Black American history, and diversity education².

The heart of the **Serving Communities** project is supporting senior library leaders in the development of sustainable inclusive libraries. We were and are aware of the potential personal risks for these leaders in discussing what it takes to create a sustainable inclusive culture at their libraries as each works in their own ways toward that goal. As a result, to ensure that they could speak freely and safely we have de-identified these libraries, leaders, partners, and communities. The contexts do vary but we chose to sacrifice some detail in order to maintain the professional and personal safety of these leaders and partners.

COVID-19

These interviews were conducted shortly after COVID began to abate. All of the interviewees talked about the stress of trying to provide services, support staff, stay healthy, and plan for the future during that roughly two-year period. These leaders are still dealing with the aftermath (e.g., staff fatigue, burnout, layoffs and shortages; interrupted planning and strategic planning efforts; and budget uncertainty, cuts and delays, etc.). The leadership lessons we chose to highlight here focus on the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and attributes that exemplify sustainable inclusive leadership. As you read this, also know that these leaders brought all of this and more to bear to ensure their libraries survived a major national crisis.

Using the **Serving Communities Framework** with the Case Studies

Interviews with the pilot library directors and key partners were structured around, and informed by, the **Serving Communities Framework**. Each story highlights these leaders’ self-described values,

practices, and self-knowledge that are central to the ways in which these leaders are working to change their organizations.

“The Framework is a linear matrix, leadership is not.”

The interview protocol was based on an early conception of the **Serving Communities Framework** which, thanks to the interviews and feedback from project participants and partners, has been revised extensively. The **Serving**

Communities Framework is illustrated in three ways:

1. We have highlighted leadership lessons at the beginning of each story, and provide guidance on where they align with the **Serving Communities Framework**.
2. The **Explore!** hexagons identify the specific **Framework, Dimension** and **Competency** that supports the leadership practice highlighted in the story. This is an opportunity for you to explore your own inclusive leadership practices and attitudes. There are reflection questions and a place for you to record your thoughts at the end of each story.
3. The three library leader stories have been designed to support you in reflecting on your own leadership development. Use these library leadership stories and the **Serving Communities Framework** as an opportunity to look at your own inclusive leadership and the areas you want to celebrate, change, and grow, and/or share them with your staff as you address inclusion and equity as an organization. As you read the stories, you will begin to see how leadership styles vary and the ways in which inclusive leadership strengths, weaknesses, and various priorities can coexist.

Three Stories: Inclusion-centered Leadership Library Leaders

Why did the **Serving Communities** project choose to tell the stories of these three impressive library leaders? This decision was years in the making. First, Cornerstones of Science has been working with public libraries to bring science experiences to youth, adults and families since 1999. Library directors have always had a strong interest and sustained operational capacity for developing library services and experiential programs around science themes that are of interest to their patrons and community.

Secondly, the four Dimensions of the **Serving Communities Framework** and increased community access are active elements at all levels:

1. individually;
2. within library operations;
3. through collaborations with local government and partners; and,
4. with diverse community member groups.

In *Three Stories*, you will explore inclusive leadership from different perspectives. In:

STORY 1 Leveraging Personal Values for Greater Community Inclusion

highlights the power of a leader who builds on the lessons derived from their own personal and professional lived experiences to guide her operational decisions to support staff, use resources and assets at hand to create a welcoming environment for all community members. **Jessie**, who is the Director of Western County Branch Library, is adept at drawing from an array of highly varied, and sometimes quite difficult, professional and personal life experiences, so that she can create an inclusive culture in a library that is located in an area where prioritizing “diversity, equity, and inclusion” is a contentious issue.

STORY 2 Breaking Internal Barriers to Create Community Access

highlights the power of a leader who strategically uses their position to create internal systems that increase efficiency and use of resources with the ultimate result of making the library system more equitable and accessible. **Robin**, who is a Division Manager at the Big County Library System, is a self-described systems thinker. She does not have an outward facing role, but uses her knowledge and ability to plan and see the big picture in order to create contracting, financial, and key systems that provide more transparency and access for the community.

STORY 3 Library Staff as Change Agents

This inclusive leadership story explores the strategic use of the Director’s positional power, along with empowering a strong leadership team, to create an accessible and responsive library system. **Greer**, who directs the Midsize County Library System, has a collaborative style and capacity to lead from behind which has allowed for more staff involvement in creating and supporting equity and access.

As their stories unfold, each of these experienced leaders occupies different roles in their libraries and each brings their unique leadership style, history, and personality to the role. One thing they have in common is being in positions (i.e., both finding the right roles while simultaneously shaping them) where they can maximize their inclusion-centered leadership strengths.

Shared Attitudes and Practices that Support Inclusion-centered Library Leadership

Though their inclusion-centered leadership styles were developed by their individual lived experiences and the unique library organizational cultures and the communities they reside in, these library directors

share other attributes that are requisite to supporting their inclusion-centered leadership:

- They are masters at **“reading the room”** and adapting accordingly. They are able to manage up, down, and laterally (and recognize the need to be able to do that).
- They know that in order to be successful in promoting change, they have to be effective as managers, such as: **developing staff skills, setting priorities, and collaborating and forming partnerships.**
- As effective managers, they are adept at using the tools at hand to integrate equity and inclusion throughout library operations, such as **creating contracting processes** that encourage working with diverse cultural/ethnic businesses; **hiring diverse staff**; and developing outreach services and programs that **engage and build relationships with diverse community groups.**
- They **reflect on their role as LEADERS** and the requirements of the role that ultimately determine the success of their initiatives and strategic plans. This includes being strategic and calculating in **taking risks**, and thoughtfully **weighing the value and costs associated with pushing a boundary or a tradition.**
- They are **mindful of using their power** to protect staff at all levels but especially front-line staff. They are very aware that it is the front-line staff who are most visible, and the most vulnerable, in enacting change initiatives.
- As leaders, each sees it as their responsibility to **maintain a mission-driven long view.** This includes strategic planning, and a willingness to say “no” to staff requests and own the decision when the short-term gains of doing something would be detrimental to a longer-term greater gain.
- Each is aware of the **balance and interplay between “collaboration” and “ownership,”** both within the library and with outside groups.
- These leaders started their careers in roles that did not have high levels of institutional support or resources, but came with high demands. These roles provided opportunities to be creative, form partnerships, and expand the positions. These situations contributed to setting the stage for what **all three of these senior leaders possess: an expansive view of what libraries can be.** And it is here where their **organizational partners play a particularly important role in amplifying** that message.

These stories are case examples designed for you to access real-life leadership situations, and glean meaningful information that you can put to use and learn from. We hope these stories provide a call to action, as well as a way to inform your own inclusion-centered decisions and practices moving forward.

STORY 1 Leveraging Personal Values for Greater Community Inclusion

Leadership Lessons

The inclusive leadership story of Western County Branch Library highlights the power of a leader who builds on the lessons derived from their own experience in library management in order to support staff, and use resources and assets at hand to create a welcoming environment. The four lessons highlighted in this story are:

Build on What You've Got – aligns with the *Dimension II, Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module*, which are the organizational internal and external factors, pressures, and demands that affect decision making.

Lived Experience Matters – aligns with the *Dimension I, Personal Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices Module*, which focus on this leader's experiences, personal beliefs, interests, and biases that inform their decision making.

A Systemic Approach to Inclusion – also aligns with the *Dimension II, Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module* in the ways in which this leader raises the visibility of the library within the county.

Strategic Framing within Local Government of the Library's Value – aligns with the *Dimension III, Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module* in the way this leader seeks to create connections to other parts of local government with the ultimate goal of being better able to serve the community.

Western County Branch Library is part of a county system of eight libraries in a western state. The Branch Library is in the county seat, the largest city within the county. Agriculture is a major industry, and Whites and Hispanics each account for over 40% of the city's population. The most recent library system-wide strategic plan includes sections about creating a welcoming environment, and increasing community partnerships, including partnering on community issues. *The terms "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion" are not used.* However, increasing library use by members of key populations is and includes members of the Latino/a community, economically disadvantaged, and "others" from underserved communities. Jessie, the Director, has an extensive background in library administration, and has served in a variety of roles, both front-facing and administrative, in different sizes and types of libraries, in a variety of geographic settings.

Build On What You've Got

Jessie comes to the Director position with a lot of professional experience and passion about libraries. According to Jessie, continuous learning is one part of the culture that keeps her passionate about the work, and highlights the ways in which libraries can grow and change:

"I was in this professional community of people who made a lot of sense to me, and also, I was in this profession that valued continuous learning. The thing about librarianship, and how I think I've been able to last as long as I have, is that every single day is different. I like as much control and latitude over my day-to-day activities as I possibly can have. When you're doing a frontline library job, you have less immediate control over the shape of your day and you're doing something different. There are always opportunities to explore what is interesting to you. So even if there are boring things you have to do, there will be more interesting things when you're done. And that has kept me in libraries throughout my career."

Jessie explained that the library, city, and county are smaller than other places she's worked, with less resources, but that her staff is one of the library's greatest assets. She said,

"It's not nearly as well funded as the other places that I've worked. But I've had the chance to take something with excellent bones, and some of the best staff I've ever worked with anywhere, and work to get us moving in a really, really good direction. Despite the fact that we're not open nearly as many hours as we should be, and despite the fact that there are so many things that we can't do, there are so many interesting, creative and responsive things that we are doing. It's a pleasure to come to work every day. The people here are fantastic. The staff is world class. What I say to people is the only thing we don't have is money. And on some level, that's the easiest thing to get."

Lived Experience Matters

Jessie is a leader who is able to reflect on her own personal experiences and identify the ways they have impacted her practice and her approach to inclusive leadership. She shared this story:

"I want to tell this [early career experience] because it has informed, in some really profound ways, the way that I have conducted myself moving through my career. There was a customer patron, an older gentleman. At one point, I was helping him with something and he literally backed me into a corner. He was saying sexually inappropriate things."

I was afraid he was going to try to touch me and I happened to be holding a really big book that I put between us so I could get myself out of the corner of the stacks that we were in. When I told my manager what had happened, she said, ‘Oh, okay, if he comes in again, just let us know. And you won’t have to help him.’

That was a main motivator throughout my career, and certainly ever since I’ve had any kind of supervisory role or responsibility. An absolute zero tolerance for targeting and harassment of staff by members of the public has been really, really important to me. If we’re talking about gender in conjunction with all of the other absolutely important other spokes of diversity, I think the challenges that we still have there are not inconsequential. And I think that we forget, because librarianship is a female-dominated profession, that we exist within a world that is kind of the opposite of that. You may be a woman working with a whole bunch of women, we are all facing something that is not necessarily woman friendly all the time.”

She also talked about learning to use the power she had early on:

“I had no functional power in terms of where I was in my library’s hierarchy. I was responsible for making sure that we were providing teen services at all of our locations but I had no power to make that occur. What I had to learn was how to lead by encouraging, cajoling, making it easy, making it fun, you know, bringing people along. I learned how to do that, how to get people on the same side.”

A Systemic Approach to Inclusion

Jessie discussed the challenges and strategies around attracting Latina/o employees, even though they make up more than half of the county’s residents, while ensuring that community member needs are met. Jessie said,

“People don’t think of the library as a great and interesting place to work, so figuring out how to communicate that to anybody, let alone our Spanish-English bilingual population who are isolated, even as they are the majority in the county, is an added challenge. I just think in terms of their connection to community resources. Folks are connected to the school, but that doesn’t always translate to knowing and using the library. People may be getting social services, but that doesn’t translate to the library. We’re still existing in this kind of outside place. And that’s true even within the county, even within county

EXPLORE!

Dimension I:
Personal Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices Module

Competency 1:
Personally Value Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access

EXPLORE!

Dimension II:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module

Competency 2:
Sustaining Library Operational Alignment with Diverse Community Member Wants and Needs

EXPLORE!

Dimension III:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Competency 1:
Invest in the Development of Local Government and Partnerships to Address Science-based Issues Affecting Marginalized Groups and Community Well-being

employees ... Honestly, part of my strategic approach for this next year is to ramp up our visibility among county employees, and put the library in front of those county employees. We’re a high-poverty county, lots of families have caseworkers. Do those caseworkers know anything about the library? Probably not. I can’t guarantee that when they (Spanish speakers) walk into a library, there’s going to be somebody there that can help them in the language that they’re most comfortable in. I can guarantee that my staff will do their damndest, and we’ll get on the phone and have somebody who can do those interactions. I can guarantee that you won’t walk in and walk back out again because nobody can help you.”

Strategic Framing Within Local Government of the Library’s Value

Jessie is adept at bringing her self-awareness and strategic approach to positioning the library for success in a county that has more ease with a business mindset/orientation than a service one. She deeply understands the larger context within which she needs to operate and the need to create a shared language if she wants to be heard as well as position the library as a vital community institution in the eyes of local government. She is able to take the long view and weigh the pros and cons of her

approach. Jessie explains it this way:

“I think a huge part of what I bring that makes this work for me is incredible enthusiasm about the library and its possibilities. This is an example, the county does a visioning exercise every two years as part of the budget cycle, and it’s got a very specific structure. All of the different departments are in different affinity groups, and the library is in its own affinity group. When I first got here, the affinity group that the library was in included providers of quality educational experiences. The types of indicators that they were looking at were things like kindergarten readiness and the low third grade reading level. For the last couple of years, I’ve been saying, ‘This really isn’t what we’re doing. Oh, look at developing economically viable districts, that would be an affinity group that we would be really good in.’ As a result, I became an enthusiastic messenger on how we contribute to economic development in every realm.

When I’m doing a public speech, I can talk about the data that shows that for every dollar invested in state public libraries, you get between two and ten back, generally around six. When I’m talking about early literacy, I can talk about how early literacy leads to kindergarten readiness, leads to success in school, leads to economic development, ... I’m making those connections everywhere I possibly can. Did I get us into economic development? Not officially. But I did get quality educational experiences expanded to say ‘support lifelong learning and development.’ Baby steps, right? I’ve been able to broaden people’s perspective of what the library is. That’s what tickles the brains here. It also happens to be true that libraries are good for economic development. I’m not making that up, of course. But I know that is something that people will respond to.

They don’t expect me to be able to talk about numbers. I am constantly walking into rooms where I am underestimated. It’s not about gender, we have lots of women in this county in very high positions, it’s the library. They see us as a small mousy department. There are very good reasons to maintain that stance because it keeps people out of your business. But we’re not going to be able to get where we want to get if I hang on to that. So, I have to be enthusiastic. And I have to be in your face in the smiling, nicest, least threatening way possible.”

Partner Observations

Importance of Partners as Advocates

Jessie’s library partner understands that Jessie has to walk a fine line as an employee of the county and that they can advocate for the library in ways that Jessie cannot. The partner, a member of the Library Foundation, knows that raising money is important,

but added,

“there’s a missing piece, and I felt it is the advocacy piece. We need to get going in this area. We need to get out, we need to have messages. We hit the Board of Supervisors with the message about all the things the library offers that are beyond books. It’s all the resources we are building and you’re going to have to step up to the plate, and you’re going to have to say, ‘Yes, I support this’.” The partner went on to add, “and now we’re going around to all of the Friends’ groups with the same message.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension III:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Competency 2:
Broad array of community partners are essential to culturally responsive access to community well-being

Importance of Partners as Communicators

Jessie’s library partner also takes the message of the value of the library into the community:

“It is a critical hub for the community. If you’re in need of a job, in need of language help, if you are in need of a passport, if you are in need as a veteran, for example, wanting to find what resources are available in the community. If you want to be tutored ... it goes well beyond a book to check out. One of the arguments that people would say to me all the time about why we don’t need more funding is, ‘the library is dying, it’s going to be a museum in the future.’ That’s what I used to hear when I would do my little presentations for increased funding, and then I realized how much people do not know what we are doing. It is why we’re out there trying our best to spread the word about what it is doing with school systems, all the different nonprofits. We constantly look to how we can reach out to let the community know what we offer.”

The partner does this while being sensitive to Jessie’s needs as the Director.

“And I want to tell you that every time we go out to these places with our message, we run it by Jessie. I do not want to put her in any situation where she would hear something or be compromised because I am very acutely aware of her role as an employee of the county, but yet wanting to carry a message. We want our message to have been okay with her. And we never really step out too far, because I want it all to be supportive of what she’s trying to do in the big long-range picture.”

STORY 2 Breaking Internal Barriers to Create Community Access

Leadership Lessons

The inclusive leadership story from a senior leader highlights the power of a leader who strategically uses their position to create internal systems that increase efficiency and use of resources with the ultimate result of making the library system more equitable and accessible. The four lessons highlighted by this story are:

Embracing the Power of Partners – is about this inclusive leader’s understanding that having ultimate responsibility for making decisions does not mean that the decision-making process needs to be a closed one.

Streamlining Systems to Ensure Efficiency, Equity, and Access – emphasizes that the ways in which internal systems are structured and implemented have an impact on the extent to which a library is accessible and equitable.

Framing Reality – is a skill this inclusive leader employs to support staff in understanding how they can focus on their main objectives and goals in contexts that put excessive demands on them.

Moving Past Conflict – emphasizes how this inclusive leader uses a systems approach to support collaboration between departments and groups.

The Big County Library is a midwestern library system that serves residents in the largest county in the state. The County, while majority white, has seen that population drop, while residents from other cultural and ethnic groups have increased in number. The library is part of the County’s administrative structure. The library’s commitment to its community and patrons is public and transparent, and includes:

1. a mission that references building community together;
2. a strategic plan that includes commitments to communities and patrons to reflect and respond to community diversity, changing demographics; and
3. the removal of barriers to information and content.

The community wants and values the library, and elected officials are supportive of the library making referrals to support services in the county.

Embracing the Power of Partners

Robin is the manager of one of the library system’s divisions and she reports to the Director. She sees her role and strengths as ensuring that internal library systems are working in ways that support equitable access to the library by community members and groups. She started out as a teacher and, through her work connecting youth with libraries, found that a career in libraries was the path she wanted to pursue. Robin has always looked to engage

others as a way to efficiently accomplish goals. Early-on, while working with youth services, Robin said,

“I learned a lot about leveraging my county partners because I couldn’t, as one person, serve all those kids, but I could change the mindset and the awareness of all the people that were in that system. And that’s really where I focused. And that’s really been and what I’ve led with since.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension II:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module

Competency 1:
Prioritize an Inclusive, Equitable, and Accessible Library Culture for Staff and Community

Robin stressed the importance of listening to others, making space for differing points of view, while also being in a position where she is ultimately responsible for making the final decision.

“I like to understand the problem, move to a decision. I know that about myself. I’ve learned how to make a whole bunch of space for people who need whatever amount of time to do that.”

As the scope of Robin’s position and responsibility grew, so did her reliance on reaching out to others as part of her decision-making process. She described her approach to meetings involving regional library staff:

“I would say, ‘Okay, all the experts are in the room. You guys can decide. If you do not decide by the end of this meeting, I’m going to listen to what’s been said and I’ll take it under advisement because I need a decision by the time we leave. Either you can tell me what it is, or I’ll pick it based on what’s been said in the room.’ That is just how I try to manage the resources available and try to gauge the importance of an issue.”

This attitude and skills around listening and acting can be found in Robin’s response to embedding social workers at the library in order to assist community members in connecting to needed local resources. She said,

“The embedded social worker is just understanding how the bureaucracy works, right? I went to human services after we collected the data [on the need for social workers]. They ended up saying to me, ‘Do you think maybe we could put somebody in your building?’ I said it was a great idea. So, even in this

conversation, when it sounds like yeah, I made these decisions, I got people to make these decisions, I supported their understanding in thinking this was a good idea.”

Streamlining Systems to Ensure Efficiency, Equity, and Access

Robin’s primary involvement with the community is through the library’s contracting process. It is used by an extensive range of service providers including authors who are reading their work, artists who are hanging their paintings, and non-profits sponsoring programs and presentations. As Robin described it,

“all that you see where there is a third party in our building involves a contract.”

As a result, Robin works closely with the system CFO and staff in budget and finance. Robin described coming into a contracting system that was complex, spread out over many individuals executing contracts, and was inconsistent in its processes and application. The lack of transparency and complexity of the contracting process had consequences for building community partnerships. Robin described it:

“It’s not literally just the contracting, it’s the whole way that we say, ‘Here’s who we’re going to work with, here’s how we work with them. Here are some frameworks for how we think about how much to compensate them. Here are the timelines for the pieces of the process. And here is how we tell the community what’s happening.’”

Robin and her team created ways to interface between all of the departments involved, with sensitivity to departmental roles, workloads, and sustainability of systems that were being developed.

EXPLORE!

Dimension II:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module

Competency 2:
Sustaining Library Operational Alignment with Diverse Community Member Wants and Needs

Framing Reality

Robin sees one of her roles as supporting peoples’ understanding of how they meet objectives and goals in order to prevent staff from burning out. She describes what she does in two ways: framing reality and helping people move past feeling like they are in conflict. Robin used the example of “donut emergencies” — front line staff who are stressed out because there are no donuts for a scheduled program.

“We can just let people know there are no donuts. I say to staff, ‘it’s going to be disappointing if there are not donuts, but it’s not going to be a crisis.’ And then people feel like they have a job they can do.”

Or “author event emergencies.”

“If people don’t get their information in on time, we’re going to ask them to reschedule. We love this author, we’d love to do it. It’s okay that we say ‘Oh, sorry. Remember how we’re just a big bureaucracy? And you already know we’re super overworked. We’re going to have to reschedule this right?’ I call that framing the reality of the urgency.”

Moving Past Conflict

Robin brings her systems thinking to building bridges between departments, groups, and individuals in order to be able to get the work done. Robin describes how she does this:

“It is a thing that people have named for me, that’s been really interesting. About 10 years ago, somebody said to me in a senior team meeting, ‘you take so many risks!’ And I laughed, ‘Oh, no, the things that I think are risks? I don’t do those things. These things are not risks, to me these are just getting the work done.’ But for me to say to my team, or to say to the person over there [in another team], ‘Would it be okay with you if we rewrote this [public document] because it feels like we’re getting feedback that people don’t understand it, and that they find it kind of scary?’ And then say, ‘Would it be okay, if we work together on that?’ And then, ‘Do you feel like if I set that up for you, you could talk to them, because I know, you know what needs to be said?’ ... So it’s getting everybody to move toward the solution by bridging those spaces where they’re like, ‘But that’s not my work.’ And I end by saying to that [particular office’s] staff, ‘the CFO isn’t here right now but I feel

EXPLORE!

Dimension II:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Library Organizational Culture Module

Competency 1:
Prioritize an Inclusive, Equitable, and Accessible Library Culture for Staff and Community

EXPLORE!

Dimension III:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Competency 1:
Invest in the Development of Local Government and Partnerships to Address Science-based Issues Affecting Marginalized Groups and Community Well-being

confident if the CFO was here s/he would support this, and we have talked about this, and she would support me in that.’ It’s bridging. It’s not interfering with direct supervision, but it’s bridging those dotted lines. I can hold some authority that my colleague and I both hold. That’s what I’ve had in tons of the work that I’m describing. The director would literally say, ‘Yes, if you need to invoke me, please invoke me.’ And I would use it very judiciously. When it makes sense for people to be like, ‘Really, this is ok?’ I say, ‘Yeah, there are other people who support this.’”

Robin emphasized that the success of this approach is grounded in trust by her staff that Robin will support them and she tells them that.

“That’s where I’ve really grown to be listening for those concerns. And then even when I’m doing that, I’m just sort of intuitively in the moment, doing it. Often you just have to ask. I bring a curiosity, and I know that’s the only way to get things done. You have to understand what’s going on with people ... it’s possible to get some insights into [their fears] and help them think about it for themselves because they often are just having a reaction, or are doing what they think they’re supposed to be doing.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension III:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Competency 1:
Invest in the Development of Local Government and Partnerships to Address Science-based Issues Affecting Marginalized Groups and Community Well-being

Partner Observations

Importance of Partner as Systems/Organizational Thinker

Robin’s partner is the CEO of the library’s Friends organization who also has had successful careers in corporate and private sectors. She brought those perspectives and skill sets to her role in the county. She is a self-described “big believer in strategic planning.” She took the Friends organization through an intensive strategic planning process to clarify and codify their role. Their role is now to first, communicate, raise awareness and appreciation of the library. Second, to raise financial resources. The third is creating an inclusive, accessible organization,

“bringing inclusion in diversity, equity, across all levels of our organization.” And fourth is “continuing to invest in infrastructure and in every part of our business around fundraising and developments and marketing and promotion ... We use data, we use statistics, we use the best fundraising methods, and we partner. We try new things and we innovate.”

Her organization’s clarity about their role and process enables them to better support the strategic direction of the library director and senior staff.

Importance of Partners in Prioritizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Robin’s partner explained the importance of prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organization’s new strategic plan. She explained,

“It was something that was embedded across our last plan. It was across all of our goals, but it wasn’t really called out. If you really want to measure, to hold yourself accountable, it needs to be one of the standing pillars ... A lot of what we do is around equity, because we fund a lot of the programs at the library that offer accessibility and ways to get new communities into the library, to support those communities, and to empower communities to have access.”



STORY 3 Library Staff as Change Agents

Leadership Lessons

The inclusive leadership story about the Director of the Midsize County Library System explores the strategic use of their positional power, along with empowering a strong leadership team to create an accessible and responsive library system.

Responding to the Community – is about ensuring that library programs are driven by community needs rather than the library’s perceived solutions to them. This lesson is anchored in the *Dimension IV, Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Community Member Experiences Module*, the ongoing awareness of the makeup, needs, and wants of the communities served and to be served by the library.

The Library’s Role in Preserving Democracy – is also anchored in the *Dimension IV, Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Community Member Experiences Module*, in this instance with the library playing a pivotal role to ensure access regardless of political divides.

The Buck Stops Here – is a study in inclusive leadership and a director who understands her positional power. This lesson is anchored in the *Dimension I, Personal Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices Module*, with a focus on this director’s understanding their experiences, personal beliefs, interests, and biases that inform and motivate their decisions as they create and sustain library programming, services, and policies.

The Midsize County Library System is comprised of nine libraries. The county’s residents are predominantly White (73%), with Blacks (7%) and Hispanics (8%) comprising the largest minority groups. Census shows that the county is equally divided across suburban, urban, and rural areas, although library staff describe it as primarily suburban and rural. Several major highways run through the county enabling over half of the county’s residents to work outside of the county. Education is valued and the county is home to one of the state’s largest school districts.

Greer is director of the library system and works very closely with her senior management team. She describes her focus as being on the operations side of things. The work of the senior leadership team as a whole includes the strategic development of programs and services (including adult and digital), communications, and community engagement. Greer started working in libraries right out of college, believing that libraries are “the

equalizer that can help people find the information they need to make their lives better.”

Greer uses the library’s mission to add focus to their work. Greer has the library’s mission statement on her office wall. Like many libraries, this mission statement references learning and community. Greer uses it as a touch point in her decision making.

“I keep our mission up front and center. It’s right there on my board. Our mission is pretty broad, but I just reflect on it. We cultivate community. So, I ask myself questions, is this event going to help develop the community? Is it going to offer creativity? Is it going to offer an opportunity to learn? I really think that through, and we’ve been trying to get our staff to do that, too. We have a program screening tool that asks ‘does this fit our goals and strategies in the plan?’ ‘Do we have a community partner where we have to put all of the pieces together??’ So, it’s not just me, it should be happening as it comes up the line.”

Responding to the Community

Greer and two senior colleagues discussed the changes in the county and how it is becoming more diverse. More wealth has come into the county but so has more poverty. There are more people who speak Spanish as a first language who are asking for communications in Spanish. The demand for service has increased. But even before these changes occurred, Greer made a conscious decision to connect with the community and “*understand what they need for success.*” Greer said,

“For so long in my career, I’ve heard librarians say, ‘Oh, that’s a great idea, let’s do this program’, I did that myself too. And then two people show up. Because just because we think it’s a great idea doesn’t mean it really is from community.”

Greer and her colleagues learned about the Harwood Approach⁴ and used that as the basis for developing their own model of community engagement that they use locally. The library system now has a community engagement coordinator.

EXPLORE!

Dimension IV:
Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Community Member Experiences Module
Competency 2:
Building Long-term Partnerships with Diverse Communities

The Library’s Role in Preserving Democracy

“Success in responding to the community means that the community begins to respond to you.” While the library added programs to meet its increasingly diverse community’s needs, it also received pushback from a “conservative faction of the county that has been here for a long time. It does not always want to move as quickly as we do.”

One of the senior staff described the county as sitting “right in the middle of the red blue divide.” Internal staff conversations and conversations with a nonprofit community partner led to the decision to pilot a Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshop.⁵

“It took a lot of work initially. How to find a way to figure out how to do that in the library setting and when. The design of the program is that you need to have a balanced

number of people who identify on the blue side of politics, and on the red side of politics. You need to have a balanced number. So, we had to do some different kinds of recruiting for the program. We did an initial session, and it was very interesting and successful, and then we ended up working with the community. A local community group that grew out of that initial session, which was volunteer led, got trained by the facilitator who developed the program. That led to sessions and we just started doing them. We did them at all of our library locations in the county, working through networks to recruit participants as awareness grew, we had people from the community asking about it and wanting to participate.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension IV:

Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Community Member Experiences Module

Competency 3:

Building a Sustain Broad-based Coalition to Operationalize and Create Programs and Services to Address Science-based Community Issues

And ultimately say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I really felt strongly that this is exactly what we needed. But I can’t say that there weren’t a few moments where I was like, ‘Oh, what have I done?’ I remember talking with a local supporter saying, ‘So what are the odds that we’re going to end up in the newspaper?’ And I was kind of joking. But that’s where you have to weigh it in your mind and take the leap.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension I:

Personal Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices Module

Competency 1:

Personally Value Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access

And she added,

“There’s also a time when, as the leader, you say, ‘oh, no, our community’s not ready for that.’ For example, I just got a request this morning to host a drag queen story time. Our county is not there, and half the Board of Commissioners are not there. I would have to spend quite a bit of political capital to even make it happen. And then the political or the publicity, blowback would not be worth it. So, yes, you need to be brave. But you also need to be based in reality, you can’t choose everything. You have to have an understanding of the political will and the political process in the community. And sometimes you say, ‘Okay, I understand that’ and you go forward anyway. But other times you say ‘no.’ ”

Imagining and Creating Possibilities

Greer and her colleagues reflected on what has made some of their larger, riskier undertakings work. One of the senior team members said,

“You hear Greer saying, ‘who was doing that one?’ because some of this is the work of the staff, and community engagement, and EDI [equity, diversity, inclusion] is the work of everyone. There’s no way a library director, even in a library our size, can be in touch with every single item of community engagement or equity efforts that someone’s doing. So, I think some of it was that we let go. And I think some of it is that we were brave, and we tried something we had never done before. We were like, well, maybe this might fail, right? And I think the group was really worried at first about getting it exactly right. We learned to let go of that and be adventurous and willing to learn new techniques. We learned from each other in the community. And there were formal and informal trainings involved. And I’ll just add, good communication, because certainly we were talking to each other, in the community and others, and certainly reporting to Greer and senior management.”

The Buck Stops Here

Greer discussed her role as the Director.

“The thing that’s important about the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshop is that it took a lot for us to decide how to proceed but the ultimate decision rested with me. We set up the environment where someone has an idea like that, and they’re comfortable bringing it forward, and saying we should do this, and then it makes it all the way up to the director. The director has to balance the political environment, is this a good thing to do? Is this going to help us move forward and advance our mission?”

Another senior team member added,

“I think being brave was really important. And also, it’s just not being afraid to use our resources in a different way or to imagine more possibilities, for we have a lot of resources. And thinking about what’s the most effective. It’s a little bit of that kind of letting go, but we’re still responsible and accountable. But just like seeing the possibilities, and helping staff, all staff who are working as part of the project, we had to remember we had to convince staff that this was not more work, it was doing the work they’d already been doing in a different way. Because they kept saying, ‘How are we going to have time to do this?’ That took quite a bit. So, the communication I think, was really key was that. ‘No, this was the work you’ve always been doing. We just got to try it this way.’ And we did really work hard to make sure that failure was okay. If it didn’t work out. We’ll try another thing because you know, we started with Hardwood and that wasn’t quite right for us. It just wasn’t enough. So, we created the next steps.”

Partner Observations

Supporting Libraries as Part of Connecting Government to Communities

Greer’s partner is a policy maker and the library system is one of the areas they oversee. The lessons highlighted here are the ways in which Greer’s partner connects her policy making work and her responsibility for the library. Supporting libraries is a way of connecting government to communities. Greer’s partner sees “the value proposition of what libraries are as a policy maker” and in so doing, she situates libraries as a government entity that can directly connect to community members:

There are places that we as a county interact with citizens that we kind of only get them in certain places. And the library is one of those places. I liken it a lot to schools, where schools end up being a social service resource on all kinds of things from hunger to mental health to, you know, child development, just because they’re there. It’s recognizable. It’s a building and we have very deliberate contact with people. I think libraries are that way as well. I think that people see a lot of possibility in ways that we can leverage our connection to the community through libraries. And some of those ways are through business development and the makerspaces that are popping up, we’ve talked about how social services can connect with libraries. And I think some libraries that are connecting more with social service agencies because we know people are falling through the cracks. And we need to find ways to reach people and be available to people in ways that they might not be comfortable coming to a government building, even though it’s a government building...

You know, government isn’t always the best first contact for a lot of people, for your community, in the communities of color that have had higher rates of incarceration, and interactions with child protective services. You’re not going to like it when the county comes knocking on your door. So, to me, the library is a safe space for our citizens, for many, many things.”

EXPLORE!

Dimension III:

Inclusion-centered Leadership Practices in Building Community Partnerships Module

Competency 1:

Invest in the Development of Local Government and Partnerships to Address Science-based Issues Affecting Marginalized Groups and Community Well-being

Defending the Budget in Order to Increase Access

Greer’s partner’s defense of the budget takes what is a reluctance to fund building improvements and centers the impact of budget decisions in community access.

Fast forwarding to a budget discussion this year, we had a couple of libraries that were slated for upgrades. And the board said, “well, we want to push that back to next year because we have more important stuff we need to fund. And making our libraries prettier, doesn’t need to be a priority.”

They don’t need to be pretty, and it’s like, hold on! They do get prettier when we do our library upgrades, but they also get new sensory rooms, so that we’re serving people with disabilities who may need a quiet space, we’re responding to the individual needs for study rooms, or huddle rooms where people can meet one-on-one or do work, because so many people are working remotely, and people are looking for that space. We’re responding to greater technology needs. We’re responding to the way our kids and teenagers need places to gather. This is a very hurting community, our teenagers in our communities. The libraries are looking at how can we bring some trauma informed spaces for kids in our community who are teenagers who need a space to gather and are doing things like lowering the stacks, and making our libraries more open.

All the research is showing us that this is what we need to do to better serve our communities to be more welcoming, adding these sensory spaces. And there’s just multiple layers of ways that libraries are investing, that these upgrades are about the way we serve people, not what libraries look like, but how we’re able to serve people.”

CONCLUSION

All of these leaders' stories point to inclusion-centered leadership being the interplay between personal experience and attributes, attention to internal organization practices and culture, and community assets and needs.

These leaders demonstrate that this type of leadership requires bringing intentionality and commitment to inclusion in all types of context and situations, from day-to-day practices with staff, to resource and policy management, to how the library is positioned in county government.

Organizationally, what we learned through the *Serving Communities* project and these interviews is that library leaders who seek to create sustainable, inclusive libraries benefit greatly from the articulation of the skills and attitudes needed to do that, along with having ways to benchmark progress.

Equity and inclusion is complex, and library directors need to balance many voices and priorities. Any small, intentional movement toward equity and inclusion is substantive and consequential. Not doing anything, or retaining the status quo, has the inadvertent effect of intentionally denying access to the library.



RESOURCES

¹Allam, Hannah. “Culture war in stacks: Librarians marshal against rising book bans,” The Washington Post, March 2, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/03/02/culture-war-stacks-librarians-marshall-against-rising-book-bans/> (Accessed July 30, 2023)

²“ALA Statement on Censorship of Information Addressing Racial Injustice, Black American History, and Diversity Education”, American Library Association, September 20, 2021. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statement/opposition-censorship-racial-injustice-black-history-diversity-education> (Accessed July 30, 2023)
Document ID: 784bf4ec-e0d1-4acd-8628-96388033a0db

³See definition in *Serving Communities: A Glossary for an Inclusive Library*.

⁴Started in 2014, Libraries Transforming Communities is an ALA initiative that sought to strengthen libraries’ roles as core community leaders and change-agents. LTC addressed a critical need within the library field by developing and distributing new tools, resources and support for librarians to engage with their communities in new ways in order for libraries to become more reflective of, and connected to, their communities. The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation developed the community focused “turning outward” approach at the core of this project.

⁵Braver Angels is a national organization. 5-8 Republican-leaning citizens (“Reds”) and 5-8 Democratic-leaning citizens (“Blues”) gather together for a half-day or full-day of structured conversations. The goals are to: to better understand the experiences and beliefs of those on the other side of the political divide; to see if there are areas of commonality in addition to differences; to learn something that might be helpful to others in our community and the nation.

