

Director Confidential: A Companion to the Trustee Toolkit

An effective relationship with the board of trustees is important to a public library director's success. Depending on the type of board (governing or advisory), the director either reports directly to the library board, or the board is influential in appraising the director's performance and supporting that person's position with the library's governing body and the community.



Most importantly, an effective director/board relationship is critical to providing the best possible library service for the community. As they represent the people in library governance, trustees are an essential conduit for directors to help analyze issues that are happening around the community. The board can serve as a much-needed sounding board for library directors and provide guidance, collaboration, and support. Good trustees can be a director's best allies, and they can bring ideas, encouragement, and enthusiasm to the library. A hard-working, knowledgeable board can be of invaluable assistance.

Public library trustees are either appointed by the city or county government or elected by the community. They are unpaid volunteers with full time jobs and other commitments. While they should bring dedication and a diversity of skills, experience, and connections to the table, they may not have clarity from the outset on the mission of the library board, the responsibilities of the board, and the board's role vs. that of the library director.

The [Trustee Toolkit](#) and its accompanying [Resource Guide](#) were developed as educational tools for California public library boards. It is recommended that directors read the Toolkit and familiarize themselves with its content. This guide is meant as a companion to the Toolkit for directors, especially new directors. It provides additional guidance in key areas where library directors intersect with the library board and offers additional tools for working with and educating trustees.

About the board-director relationship in general

The keys for a productive working relationship with the library board are *respect, communication, diplomacy, and education*. New directors should recognize that the board has a history and trustees are used to doing things in certain ways. They are not likely to want to change things unless they are shown good reasons for doing so. And new directors will need to develop credibility with the board, which does not happen overnight.

New directors will want to spend time in their first year towards building trust with their boards, rather than focusing exclusively on action. This does not mean that needed changes should be ignored; indeed, a new director may have been hired specifically to address certain issues and implement new programs, and the board has hopefully identified goals and objectives for the first year. But change is difficult even when there is wide recognition of the

need to do things differently. New directors should focus on the most important matters and take the time to establish the relationships and trust that will smooth the way toward greater changes ahead. Continuing to build and sustain the board's trust throughout their tenure is important for all directors.

Directors should always convey respect for the board, its work, and its decisions, past and present. Even if the board is hard-working and productive, there may still be differences of opinion from time to time. Directors should adhere to board decisions and support them where the library staff and the public are concerned, even if they personally disagree with them (except in cases that may involve doing something illegal or unethical, more about this later). Any problems created by decisions can be documented and brought to the board; likewise positive results can be communicated and praised.

A strong rapport with trustees is important to the director's success. Directors should try to get to know their board members individually, to learn how they view the library's stature in the community and visualize the future of libraries. Learning where board members are coming from is essential to understanding what their viewpoints might be when presenting different topics and issues. Directors should meet with trustees individually outside of board meetings, ask what feedback they are getting from the community about the library, and listen carefully to what they have to say. This will help directors anticipate issues and problems in working with the board and strategize on how to deal with them.

While dealing with issues and problems is important, informing the board of the library's successes whenever possible is invaluable toward building credibility and recognition of the library's importance in the community. Directors should tell their library successes to the board whenever possible, and credit the board for its hard work and decision-making.

Board recognition. While library board service is rewarding in itself, trustees are volunteers and directors should make every effort to recognize and support board trustee service. Suggestions include:

- Pairing trustees with individuals who can provide specific support for their board work as needed, such as Internet research, use of office software, access to hardware, etc. Resource individuals could include staff, volunteers, Friends members, previous trustees, etc.
- Prominently displaying trustee names and portraits within the library
- Providing library display space for library board membership and service information
- Developing PR profiles for library board members, for inclusion in library informational and promotional materials
- Providing business cards
- Highlighting the importance of board projects in library communications and the media
- Connecting with trustees to assist with kicking off new library services or programs
- Publicly thank the board at kick-offs and programs and at library activities wherever appropriate

- Offer library programs or presentations for trustees to use in their other community activities
- Offer food at meetings (perhaps less important in the post-pandemic age)

Resources for directors (general director-board relationship):

The [Library Directors Group](#) facilitates communication, collaboration, and continuing education for library directors, especially for those in their first five years on the job.

[Making Each Other Look Good](#) (60-minute webinar by James LaRue). This webinar offers great insights from an experienced library director and board member)

[Surviving Your First Year as a Library Director](#) (article by Mary Wilkins Jordan). Advice from an experienced library director.

Director confidential (Trustee Toolkit).

The following are notes and advice specifically for directors concerning certain areas of the Trustee Toolkit.

Trustee Toolkit Principle 2. Trustees should know the scope of their library board's powers and its role compared to those of the library director and library friends/foundation groups.

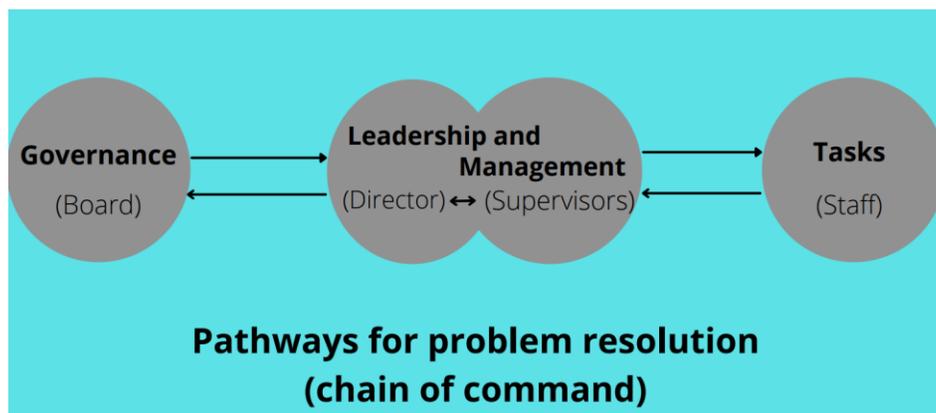
Board powers and legal authority. Directors should know what type of board they are working with and its legal powers. There are many variances in California state and local library laws, and a given board may have greater or lesser powers depending on local ordinances and practices. Directors should become familiar with the state and local laws that apply to their boards, as well as the board's bylaws, to know if the board is acting within its proper scope.

The role of the director vs. the role of the board. The most critical part of any public library director's relationship with the library board is a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities between them. When that line becomes blurred, it can become very difficult for a library director to work effectively.

The duties of the director and the board are necessarily entwined, but the main difference is this: the board's role is oversight of library operations (or advising on these to the governing body); the director's role is leadership and management. Boards must allow directors to do the job for which they were hired: managing the library. The director, not the board, employs and supervises the library staff; manages the library collection and other services, implements programming, supervises day-to-day operations, applies policies, and oversees procedures.

All of the extant literature on this subject (see the [Resource Guide](#)) stresses how important it is for library boards to understand and adhere to their oversight role, ceding library leadership and administrative responsibilities to directors. Where complaints and administrative/business issues are concerned, the board should never serve as a direct intermediary between staff and the director; the community and the staff; the jurisdictional government and the library. **These are all the responsibility of the library director.** When the board oversteps in these areas, it undercuts the library director's authority, undermines the entire organization's effectiveness,

and affects employee morale, because they may feel no one is in charge if the director's authority is not upheld.



Trustees must understand that they do not have the authority to act independently; action must be approved by the board as a whole, with the board acting in concert on decision-making. Directors should proactively ensure that the board receives training on their particular roles and responsibilities, to head off problems as much as possible.

Even with training, trustees may sometimes step over the line, and this situation can become difficult to navigate. A reminder that the board acts as a whole and that no individual has power may go a long way toward alleviating the problem, e.g., "We'll include this issue on the agenda for consideration by the full board at the next meeting." If a board member tries to dictate how to handle something that is clearly the director's responsibility, the director can say, for example, "Thank you so much for your input. I will consider that when I'm making my decision." Directors should work to maintain good relationships with board members; it is important to respond even in the case of intrusive questions, yet firmly show where the boundaries are. If matters become problematic, have a discussion with the board president. Provide additional training during board meetings if needed. Seek advice from colleagues through the library's [cooperative system](#) if things become difficult.

Remember:

Individual trustees (including the board president) do not have power. Make sure it is the board's will that you respond to, not that of an individual trustee.

Though rare, there have been known to be situations where most or all of a library board is behaving inappropriately, or even breaking the law. Because the board supervises (or influences the evaluation of) the library director, this can be one of the trickiest situations of all. The city, county, or district (whatever body determines the personnel policies for the library) should have a whistleblower policy in place that can protect directors in the case of calling out a board on illegal actions.

Directors should ask for help if things become problematic: from the library's legal counsel; from colleagues through the library's [cooperative system](#); from the [California State Library](#);

from [United for Libraries](#). There are [outside contractors](#) that offer board consultation and training; an objective outside expert can be especially helpful in dealing with difficult situations, if it is possible to bring one in.

Resources:

[Key roles and responsibilities](#) (a roles and responsibilities template that can be modified for the political/legal circumstances of each library; provides a visual summary of lines of responsibility between jurisdictions, governing boards, library directors, and advisory boards)

Trustee Toolkit Principle 3. A trustee should know the tenets, laws and rules that govern and guide the board's proceedings and conduct of business.

Bylaws. Directors should be familiar with their boards' bylaws and know board meeting rules, procedures, and board policies. Directors should advocate for policies important to their positions or their work (such as a director evaluation policy) if they do not exist. Directors may also consider the role of board committees and work to establish committees that might be of benefit to them. For example, a [personnel committee](#) can serve as a sounding board for personnel issues (of special help to a new director), to develop the library's labor budget (typically the largest piece of any public library's budget), and to consider new positions or consolidation of duties amongst staff to streamline efforts and manage costs.

Directors should work to see that the board has a yearly business calendar including important dates (board meetings, budget process, director evaluation, etc.) to ensure that required business is completed and deadlines are not missed.

Building a better board. A strong library board is built with members who bring a variety of skills and expertise to the library. The board and director do not appoint or elect new members, but they can work with appointing officials and with the public to ensure that the trustee job description is widely and publicly available and encourage community members who would make good board members to run for election or submit their names for appointment. Where trustees are appointed, the director and the board chair, or another trustee interested in board development, should meet with the appointing official to discuss the skills and qualities the library needs in its trustees. The official should be given job descriptions of the trustee positions and a "wish list" for skills and expertise needed on the board. Officials and the public should be encouraged to view library board membership as an important rather than an easy job.

Board recruitment should be regarded as an ongoing commitment. Throughout the year, the director should report to the board members about library users and library supporters who would make good board members. Throughout the year, the trustees should talk to the director about community leaders who would make good board members. The director and the existing board should stay on watch for residents that would make good board members. Examples might include political leaders, community leaders, successful professionals, successful businesspeople, church leaders, organization leaders, active mothers of school age children. People who are involved in other community organizations have connections in place that may be important to the library and the board.

Useful skills for the library board might include accounting; business; background in education; fundraising skills and knowledge of funding issues; tax knowledge; legal knowledge; human resources management experience; marketing and public relations skills; public speaking skills.

The position of library trustee should be marketed as a job that is critical to library development and a very important service to the community. Potential board members should never be told that “you just have to attend a monthly meeting.” The library board is critical to the library’s success and requires dedication and hard work.

Board meetings. It usually falls to the library director, at least in part, to draft the agenda for board meetings and to put together the agenda packet. This is a key role that a director can use, working with the board president, to guide the board’s deliberations toward making decisions that further the achievement of goals that fulfill the library’s mission and strategic plan.

The library director is always an integral part of the agenda for the board meeting, a central piece of which normally includes a director’s report. A written report should be included in the agenda packet, and the director should also verbally present the report and answer any related questions.

The director’s report is a valuable tool for open communication with the board and to help prepare them in advance for questions they may receive from the public. It is also the best way to provide board members with the information they need to provide effective oversight and fulfill their responsibilities regarding library planning and community connection.

Remember:

Board meeting agendas and director reports are your best tools for shaping the conversation with your library board.

If the board is given only administrative information and issues to consider at board meetings, then that will be their main focus. But if they are given the higher-level information they need to fulfill their oversight and planning responsibilities, such as library statistics in context, changes in the community and political environment, trends in technologies and library services, and community changes, this paves the way for more informed discussions about what drives, and will drive, the library’s current and future success.

Directors should be open and informative with their boards but also avoid overwhelming them. Think strategically on how issues are placed for consideration by the board, breaking down the steps for accomplishing goals and building on decisions meeting to meeting.

Tips for writing the agenda and the director’s report:

- Include any items which the community may bring up with trustees, or that may be emerging problems, issues, or trends (e.g., changes in day-to-day operations, the facility, website, collections, or budget). Present potential problems or opportunities early on and ask the board to help explore actions or solutions. Later, include how their suggestions were incorporated and discuss the positive results. This smooths the

decision-making process, because the board was involved in developing the plan of action, and it helps build trust.

- Introduce new concepts as case studies, for example: “Here’s a real problem that was faced by a library in XXX. Here’s what happened, and their approach to resolving it.” Or, “Here’s a really successful program being implemented in several libraries nationally. These are some of the outcomes so far. This might address XXX community need, where we currently have little programming in that area. What do you think about implementing it here?”
- Address financial matters that may come up later for a board vote; flag upcoming large expenditures and contract approvals. Try never to surprise the board with financial decisions, even if contracts are long-standing in nature.
- Provide relevant statistics in context, for example:
 - Year-to-date circulation statistics as compared to last year/5 years ago and factors contributing to growth/contraction, e.g., electronic resource usage
 - Program attendance translated into a ROI value for the community
 - Library cards issued and what percentage of the service population this represents
 - Number of users using the library’s public computers and what it might cost them to use computers or connect to the Internet from businesses such as FedEx-Kinkos
 - Reference Questions: amount, trends staff are noticing
 - Volunteer hours and the dollar value they represent

For statistics, focus on the measures in the Library Journal (LJ) Index (physical circulation, circulation of electronic materials, library visits, program attendance, public internet computer use, WiFi sessions, and e-retrievals (successful retrieval of electronic information), as main indicators of library usage and performance. [Outcomes data](#), such as how lives have been changed through library services, are equally if not more important (though harder to measure), and may be communicated formally and anecdotally (“[library stories](#)”).

Other content might include a summary of a cooperative system meeting; local and state efforts on behalf of public libraries (such as [California State Library initiatives](#)), and a “take-away,” something about the library they can take out into the community and talk about, such as an upcoming program or a new or innovative service or initiative. Stress the community need or aspiration this new service or initiative addresses.

Directors should consider presenting statistical data visually. The Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL) has [free webinars on data visualization](#). The Colorado State Library offers an [introductory guide and tools for creating reports with infographics](#). The California State Library offers assistance with library data. Any efforts to enliven reports and facilitate the understanding of the board will have a positive impact on communications and productivity.

Providing brief trainings during board meetings is a proven method for continuing education for the library board, and directors should consider building this into the agenda on a frequent

basis. More information about this is included later in this publication (under Principle 5) and also in the [Resource Guide](#).

At times during board meetings there is a need to achieve clarity on an issue where there has been significant discussion without consensus. Simply asking the question, “What is the will of the board?” can help to gel the conversation and move the decision along.

Resources:

<https://www.wildapricot.com/blog/nonprofit-board>

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2015/10/30/building-better-board-of-trustees/>

Trustee Toolkit Principle 4. Trustees should understand and collaborate to carry out the responsibilities of the library board regarding planning, leadership, policy, and budgeting.

Strategic planning. Every library should have a mission and vision statement and a strategic plan. Having a clear, data-driven, community-based strategic plan is essential toward helping focus the library’s (and the director’s) future efforts. Initiating and developing such a plan is a partnership between the library board and the director.

Before starting the strategic planning process, directors should decide if they want to craft a strategic plan on their own or with a consultant. Doing a plan on their own gives directors greater control over the process, and it is of course less expensive. Hiring a consultant who focuses on strategic planning with libraries or similar organizations saves time; the consultant has greater expertise and objectivity; and people may be more willing to speak candidly to someone who is not a staff member.

Directors should find out if the board is open to hiring a consultant, keeping in mind that the cost may be significant. Neighboring libraries can be consulted for recommendations (connect with your [cooperative library system](#)). Looking at finished products can be helpful. Directors should inquire about each consultant’s process to see if that person/company will be a good fit and avoid asking for proposals from consultants who may be challenging to work with. Once there is a list of possible consultants, the director can send out a request for proposals (see [Califa’s RFP Library](#) and the [Resource Guide](#) for examples) and submit the results to the library board for selection and approval. The director may have limited control over the consultant selection process. The board may opt to interview all the respondents; select one or two to interview; or simply select from the list they are given. Once a consultant has been chosen, that person will work with you, the board, and the library staff throughout the planning process.

Evaluating the library director. Directors should endeavor to see that the board has a library director evaluation policy, and that evaluation takes place annually. A formal evaluation process protects the director because it requires that the board establish performance objectives, document any performance issues as they occur, and put the director on notice about them as they occur. This is an issue of fairness as well as good management practice: if expectations and performance objectives are not communicated by the board, the director has no way to meet them.

There are many methods of performance evaluation for library directors. The Toolkit covers evaluation basics, and the [Resource Guide](#) has additional information. Evaluation should reflect local circumstances. There should be no real surprises during the annual performance appraisal if a formal evaluation process and lines of communication have been established with trustees.

In reality directors sometimes must initiate their own annual evaluations. In this case, directors should be prepared to submit an annual summary including goals, accomplishments, and challenges, as a template for the board's review. The main question: has the director moved the library forward, as outlined in the library's strategic plan? Directors should not allow the board to completely ignore the evaluation process.

Policy adoption. While the board is not responsible for the day-to-day running of the library, it is responsible for establishing (or advising on) the framework for the library to move in the direction it needs to go. Policies are an important part of that framework, as they guide the library staff on running the library and give them direction on how to deal with various situations. The director and the staff should collaborate on crafting policies and the director should then provide the board with background for the issue the policy addresses, so that the board can have a knowledgeable discussion. The board should not develop policies from scratch without the involvement of the director and the staff; as policies are an organizational rather than a management tool, the director and staff must be part of the process.

Budgeting. Directors should ensure that trustees understand that their support is critical for the library in the budget process. As government employees, directors must often remain neutral in budget deliberations for a number of reasons, including the avoidance of any appearance of conflict of interest. As trustees directly represent the people concerning library governance, they have the more tenable position to communicate with local officials on the library's budget. They can interpret the library's spending plans for local leaders, explain how budget changes help the library align with community priorities, and interact with local government officials in ways that the library director often cannot.

Trustee Toolkit Principle 5. Trustees should recognize the importance of orientation and continuing education for the library board and participate in ongoing learning opportunities.

The library board should devote time and effort toward continuing education on an ongoing basis. It is the only way the board can build its competency. It is generally recognized that library trustees, especially at the outset, often do not understand the board's role in library governance and their duties as trustees. While there is little research data available on this, a 2005 study done by the [Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries](#) showed that most library trustees did not understand their fiduciary responsibilities when they became a member of a library board; most had not received any orientation when they joined the board; most interacted frequently with library staff on management issues (which should not occur); and the majority were not familiar with the laws governing their libraries.

Remember:

It is in your best interest to have engaged and informed library trustees.

While the board is responsible for recognizing the importance of board education and dedicating time toward creating a culture of learning, it often falls to directors, who have a depth of public library and management experience which trustees do not have, to take a proactive approach toward trustee education. The board must collaborate in this effort, showing the will to create a culture of learning amongst themselves and devoting the time for self-assessment and education.

Orientation. The director should be proactive in providing an orientation for new trustees. Directors should call newly elected or appointed trustees to welcome them, and then follow up with a [welcome letter](#) that includes some basic information such as when the board meets and key contact information and lets them know that an orientation will be scheduled.

The orientation should ideally take place before the new trustee(s) first meeting. A two-hour session is usually enough to cover the basics. Ideally, the board president and another experienced trustee would also be present. All trustees could be invited to attend the orientation; this could be an opportunity to provide overall training for the board if it is needed.

Orientation packets for the new board members should be prepared, which might include:

- General library information
 - Contact information
 - Mission, vision, strategic plan
 - Organizational chart
- Board of trustees roster
- Key staff contact information
- Calendars (board meeting dates, holiday schedule, annual calendar of actions to be taken at board meetings)
- Director's reports (past six months)
- Minutes (past six months)
- Financial reports (past six months)
- Annual library budget
- Board by-laws
- Important library policies
- Any large-scale project information (master plans, capital improvement plans, etc.)
- Additional resources from cooperative library system, California Library Association, and California State Library (including the Trustee Toolkit)

An [agenda for the orientation](#) should be prepared, which will help participants stay on track and ensure that all the vital details have been covered. Include a library tour if possible. The goal is that new trustees leave the meeting with at least a basic knowledge of how the library runs, how the board meetings run, and what the library's current projects are.

If time is an issue, another approach might be to break the orientation down into two stages. The first stage can be considered preparation for the first meeting and cover the main elements that will occur, including process, calendar, contacts, and first meeting agenda with minutes

from the previous meeting. More in-depth content can be covered at a second stage to include policies, planning, finances, and projects.

As experts in public libraries, directors should be open to answering new (and experienced) trustees' questions about libraries and serve as a resource for information about emerging library issues and trends.

Continuing education. Approaches to continuing education include offering trustees the opportunity to attend conferences and other trainings; holding trustee in-services or retreats; and dedicating time during board meetings for short educational sessions. Education should be tailored to the board's needs, and the library director and the board should support, budget, and pay for travel and training related to board education, as well as continuing education for the library staff.

If the board needs intensive training and/or if there are issues that can be best resolved with a neutral party, bringing in a consultant to conduct training can be beneficial. Consult with neighboring libraries and the library's [cooperative system](#) for recommendations.

California-based resources for trustee education include the annual [Serving with a Purpose](#) conference, sponsored by the California Library Association and others, and [advocacy tools](#) and webinars provided by the California Library Association. [California Public Library Advocates](#) offers free board training for its members. [Infopeople](#) offers free and low-cost online training in many areas concerning public libraries, which may be of benefit to library boards, and also assists in finding trainers for particular subjects.

The [Resource Guide](#) includes a number of training resources for library trustees covering the topics in the Trustee Toolkit. One source, the United for Libraries series [Short Takes for Trustees](#), is a 10-video series designed for training during trustee meetings. Each video is 8-10 minutes long and covers the basics of public library trusteeship. United for Libraries also offers the [Trustee Academy](#), which is a series of more in-depth online courses designed for trustees to attain higher proficiency. Both of these resources are fee-based, but the costs are reasonable, and they are much lower for boards that have a United for Libraries membership.

Resources:

[Sample welcome letter for new trustees](#) (Public Library Directors Toolkit)

[Board orientation template](#) (customizable PowerPoint presentation for use in board orientations)

[Building a Culture of Learning with Library Boards](#) (WebJunction). Webinar by Bonnie McKewon on continuing education for library boards, includes slides and learning guide.

A [Trustees' Retreat](#) (Library Journal article) describes benefits and structure of retreats for trustees