

SECTION 3: EDUCATING AND ENGAGING YOUR BASE OF SUPPORT

A critical step in public engagement is making sure that your internal base of support is educated on your mission, plan, policies, and actions so that they understand what the library is doing and why. This is the principle of “alignment” and it must be an ongoing, top priority for your organization so that when challenging times arise, your organization is prepared.

When a library’s base of support (board members, staff, Friends leadership) is aligned and able to communicate the library’s key messages, its supporters can achieve the library’s mission through teamwork and collegiality. In addition, once the base of support is aligned, it is much easier to ensure that any external community engagement efforts will be fruitful.

Each internal audience within your base of support must know, understand, and follow their roles. Ensuring that this is happening on a daily basis and well ahead of a challenging situation is important. Some basic guidelines for these roles and steps to take to educate these audiences are outlined in this section. You should review these guidelines and incorporate actions to follow them into your internal communications plans prior to and during any public engagement activities.

Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees plays a critical role in public engagement for the library. The board is often made up of individuals who understand the importance of personal public engagement, as they have made board service a priority in their busy lives.

The Board’s Role

The recruitment process is a crucial first step in ensuring that the Board of Trustees is aligned. The board should be a reflection of your community – a diverse group of people with different perspectives and points of view. You might consider recruiting public officials and prominent business owners as well as young adults and local clergy to participate on your board to ensure that the voices on the board reflect the voice of the community as a whole. In addition, board members must understand their roles as community trustees, and that their roles are to represent the interests of the entire community, not a vocal individual or small minority of citizens. *Please note: for governmental public libraries (e.g., county, county district, school district, township, and municipal public libraries), the library’s appointing authority makes the final decision on whom to appoint to the library board.*

During the recruitment process, the board should review the library’s policies and its public engagement plan with potential new members to ensure they understand their roles in the public engagement process.

Board members have a responsibility to openly and honestly speak their minds and to defend their points of view to the board for consideration. However, once the board has made a decision, all individuals on the board must support the decision publicly. It is critical that the new (and experienced) board members understand that if they choose

to publicly disagree with the board, they are expected to resign from board service before doing so.

Board members also play a role in being the eyes and ears of the library within the community. Board members must keep fellow board members and the Library Director informed of concerns and questions that they hear and see when out and about in the community so the board and library staff can be proactive in addressing the issues before they become crises. Many times, concerned citizens will come to board members rather than going to the Library Director, so board members can truly prevent a small ember from becoming a blazing fire.

Finally, the board should have a designated spokesperson (generally this is the Board President or Chairman) who will work closely with the Library Director and may serve as the primary public contact for inquiries, media coverage, and speaking engagements. This spokesperson should be comfortable working with the media, and should understand the basic principles of media relations as outlined in Sections 4 and 5 of this toolkit. In addition, the Library Director and board spokesperson may wish to seek professional media training to ensure they are fully prepared to work with reporters in a crisis or negative publicity situation.

Educating the Board

The board should conduct a regularly scheduled training on intellectual freedom for all new board members and an annual “refresher” training for continuing members. The training should include information about the Library Bill of Rights, the First Amendment, the library’s policies that deal with public access to information and library facilities, and a discussion of any recent challenges to these policies. The training should also review the role of the board members within the community and in relation to their support of the library’s policies and activities.

In addition, the board may wish to include a reading of the First Amendment and/or the Bill of Rights at the opening of each board meeting to remind board members of the critical role they play in upholding these important freedoms within their own community.

The board should annually review and reaffirm the library’s policies related to public access to information and collection development. This review should also include a review by legal counsel to ensure that the policies reflect any and all changes in local, state, and federal regulations and laws.

Employees

Employees are on the front line with library patrons each day. They are ambassadors of your organization when they are on and off the job. While you cannot dictate their actions off the job, you can keep them informed, updated, and engaged so they understand the needs, issues, and rationale behind the library’s actions at all times. In addition, you must ensure that employees understand that they are required to uphold the library’s policies – not their personal point-of-view – when on duty.

Similar to board recruitment, the interview and hiring process is an important time in aligning employees with the library’s position and policies. Encourage potential employees to review the library’s policies and procedures prior to hiring and question the candidates about their ability to adhere to the policies if hired.

Once hired, require employees to review the policies and procedures and sign a form attesting to their understanding of the policies and agreeing to uphold them while on duty as part of the formal orientation process. Include a section in your employee annual evaluation that analyzes each employee's success in following and supporting the library's policies and procedures.

Finally, develop a formal ongoing training program that is similar to the Board of Trustees training. The training should include a review of the First Amendment, Library Bill of Rights, and all library policies and procedures dealing with public access to the library and its materials, as well as the library's collection development policy and procedure to challenge these policies. Employees need to understand the importance of the policies to the library and protecting its future. This understanding will help quell their urge to criticize the library during their "off duty" time. The more your employees understand the rationale and need for such policies, the less likely they are to question them.

The training should also include role play situations for patrons who ask questions or voice concerns about library materials or policies to ensure that employees are prepared for such situations.

Friends of the Library

Friends groups by their very nature are supportive of the library. By arming these groups with information and keeping them up-to-date on activities, events, and issues, they will be better prepared to spread "good news" about the library and come to the library's defense when needed. Your Friends group officers will be the starting point for your educational outreach. Prepare a "mini version" of the training conducted for the board and be sure it explains the role of the board vs. the role of the Friends groups. The Friends groups are to support the library, while the board makes and upholds policies – each has a distinct, but important role to play in the library's success.

In addition, this group needs to know the importance and function of the Internet in today's world and how the library plays an important role in providing Internet access to the public. Because these groups may be less familiar with the Internet and its benefit to society, be sure to provide information to your Friends officers.