

SECTION 5: RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

So, what do you do when it happens to you?

Don't panic, and don't try to navigate the storm alone.

As we discussed in Section 3, your staff should be prepared to handle challenges in an appropriate manner, by asking the concerned party to complete a reconsideration request and referring all other issues directly to the Library Director.

However, many times, you may not know you are facing a challenge until you get a call from a reporter requesting an interview or the issue shows up in the paper through a letter to the editor.

Regardless of how the situation was brought to your attention, your first step should be to contact appropriate resources and stakeholders, to be sure they are informed and to seek advice and counsel. Remember that your communications are (in most cases) public record, so you will want to refrain from expressing opinion in written communications – keep these factual and to-the-point.

When should you contact others regarding an issue? Below are a few times that it is appropriate to raise a flag about your issue with others.

1. The complaint has been aired in a public venue (via the newspaper or a call-in radio show).
2. You have tried to resolve the issue via the library's set procedure, but the individual has escalated it to the board level and has brought the issue before the board on several occasions.
3. You find out that the individual(s) raising the complaints is part of a larger grassroots organization.

A matrix of suggested contacts, key points for consideration, and a column for you to fill in contact information is available in Appendix D.4. Complete this matrix and keep it handy at work and at home for quick reference. Once you have discussed the situation with the appropriate experts and sought their advice, you will want to assess your next steps. While only you can judge your own capabilities to handle a specific situation, the table in Appendix D.5 offers examples of the various levels of public problems or issues and the types of engagement that may be necessary. It is not comprehensive and should not be considered inclusive of all types of issues or necessary engagement activities, however, it is a good guideline to help you evaluate the situation at hand and what action is needed.

Determining Key Messages

Regardless of the level of outreach or response you determine necessary, you will want to develop a set of key messages that provide the library's perspective on the issue. These messages should focus on the "positive" of the situation, and should be clear, crisp, and concise. You should focus on three to five succinct messages that

communicate your perspective. Following is a checklist of questions that will help you formulate your key messages:

- What is the library's overall purpose or role within the community? How does it benefit the community?
- How does this issue affect the ability of the library to serve that purpose or role?
- What is the library's current policy related to this issue?
- What action or steps (if any) will the library be taking to address this issue and avoid problems in the future?
- If you were writing a news story about this issue, what would you want the headline to be?

An example of key messages in library policy/materials challenges include:

- The role of the library in our community is to provide access to information and ideas from a wide spectrum of political, social, and cultural viewpoints.
- Parents are responsible for supervising their individual child's library use, the materials they check out, and the materials they access while at the library.
- The library has a strict policy and procedure for the selection of materials that is available to our patrons, and all collection decisions are based on this policy.

Message alignment is important in external communication. Once you have established your key messages, it is important that everyone involved in the situation, particularly those people who are representing the library in public settings – from speaking engagements to front-line customer service with patrons – know, internalize, and understand your key messages throughout the duration of the challenge.

Reactive Community Relations

Issue opposition often consists of an individual or a small group of individuals within the community who work very hard to get their message out. Even those who would not have opposed the issue are sometimes persuaded to join the opposition in the absence of a competing voice. To minimize momentum for opposition, the library can call upon its allies and ambassadors throughout the community to assist in communicating the library's position and key messages through a variety of activities, some of which may include:

- **Letter to patrons/community.** If an issue rises to a very public level, the library may wish to send a letter to its patrons, neighbors, supporters, and its list of cultivated allies and elected officials. The letter will include the library's key messages and who to contact if they have questions or want to meet with a library representative.
- **Open house and special presentations.** While the library is always open to the public, this is an opportunity to invite regular and non-regular patrons alike to the library, where librarians will give tours, demonstrations, and overviews that begin to dispel misconceptions about the issue. A specific approach to this in

the form of a Community Engagement Forum is outlined in detail later in this section.

- **Displays and takeaway materials.** The library may wish to develop poster-sized displays and accompanying fact sheets and other basic materials that can be used in tandem with bulletin boards, and are available at all library events, presentations, and meetings, as well as at all library branches.
- **Mailings.** The library should consider mailing fact sheets and other basic information to allies and elected officials who can serve as ambassadors for the library. These should be sent periodically, as appropriate, to keep key messages in front of these key stakeholders.
- **Web site postings.** Today's Web-savvy patrons often seek their news from the Web. The library may wish to have a section of its Web site dedicated to this issue with the following materials posted:
 - Letter from the Library Director or Board President that mirrors the public statement, including an open invitation to tour the library, attend a special presentation, or meet with its staff.
 - Online versions of fact sheets and other support materials.
 - An e-mail address where Web users can submit questions to the library.
 - A frequently asked questions (FAQ) document that presents the most common questions accompanied by the library's answers.

Reactive Media Relations

As with any controversy, members of the media may be interested in reporting on the challenges you are facing. While it might be tempting to avoid media interactions, this is an important time to make your voice heard. Most of the time, you have no influence on the media's story selection, but you *always* have a choice in how to respond.

It's easy to talk to the news media when you have good news to report. It's much less comfortable to engage the media when things aren't going so well. Reporters understand this, and that's why in the long run you will build more credibility and goodwill by being open with the media and your community when someone is challenging your policies or actions.

Designating a Spokesperson

Before you engage with the media, you should determine the best spokesperson for the library on this issue. This person should be a consistent voice and have the authority to represent the library and the board. At times, it is appropriate to have both the Library Director and the Board President share in spokesperson roles.

Be sure to inform all of your internal audiences, as well as key media contacts, of the designated spokesperson's name, title, and contact information. Firmly communicate that no other person is authorized to serve as an official spokesperson of the library and that all media inquiries should be directed to the spokesperson at all times.

Working with Reporters

You can't hide bad news, at least not for long. Trying to cover up or hide these challenges once approached by the media only damages your credibility as an entity with the community's best interest at heart. On the other hand, your reputation can be strengthened when people see you are willing to have an open, honest dialogue with the community during both good times and bad. Some general advice when working with the media during a challenging situation:

- Agree to talk with the reporter and tell the truth as you know it.
- Resist the urge to be defensive.
- Emphasize and stick to your key messages.
- Invite the reporter to tour the library or participate in current programming to see first-hand the way the library operates.
- Offer to be a resource in the future for other library-related stories.

Additional tips for participating in an interview with a reporter are provided in Appendix D.6.

When working with a reporter, it is best to think through questions and answers in advance so that you can be fully prepared. Be sure to prepare a written "Questions and Answers" or Q&A document in preparation for interviews. A tool for developing a Q&A document is provided in Appendix D.7. In addition, the ALA has developed a sample Q&A for policy challenges, provided in Appendix D.8.

Corrections

Reporters sometimes get their facts wrong or misquote their sources. Reporters also draw on past stories in subsequent reporting about the same person or issue, which is why it is critical to contact reporters and ask them to correct incorrect information.

When you identify inaccurate coverage:

- Consult your communications counsel (internal or external).
- Tactfully contact the reporter – either in person or in writing – and clarify any miscommunication. If facts in the article were inaccurate, calmly and politely ask for a correction.
- If the reporter is not helpful or refuses to consider a correction, you may want to consider contacting the reporter's editor or news director. This will no doubt damage any relationship or rapport you have built with the reporter, so this should be done cautiously and strategically.

In some situations, it may be appropriate to write a letter to the editor or opinion guest column to correct the mistakes. Letters to the Editor Dos and Don'ts are provided in Appendix D.9.

The library might also consider a paid advertorial in the local newspaper to have their voice heard in the local newspaper without threat of editing or inaccurate reporting. Be sure to consult your communications counsel about the appropriateness, tone, and

approach for these activities so as not to damage the library's relationship with the media outlet permanently.

Holding a Community Engagement Forum

While criticisms may be aired during public participation at board meetings, if the debate becomes ongoing and the critics are dominating discussion of the issue, you may want to consider holding a community engagement forum. The purpose of a forum is to:

1. Educate participants about the library's policies, procedures, and purpose; and
2. Allow participants to have their voices heard on the issues at hand, while allowing the common sense of the majority to overcome the extreme, vocal minority.

A public meeting can be as large or as small as you want it to be, but it should not be conducted at the exclusion of key stakeholders, even those who may oppose your policies. Your credibility and reputation are strengthened when you show a willingness to listen to opposition and acknowledge public concerns.

When scheduling a meeting:

- **Contact the Ohio Library Council before initiating a public meeting.** The OLC can walk through the process with you and help you determine whether or not you need to engage professional communications support to plan and implement the forum.
- **Prepare opening remarks** to lay the groundwork for questions and comments from participants. Sample remarks are provided in Appendix D.10. Remarks should be kept concise and brief (5-10 minutes at the most), and should:
 - Discuss the purpose of the library, including information about the Library Bill of Rights, circulation statistics, collection development policies, and any other policies and procedures that are under scrutiny.
 - Put forth the goal of the meeting, which is to ensure that the community has an opportunity to be heard about issues affecting the library's service to the community as a whole.
- **Create a forum that allows people to be heard, but not a forum that allows a few vocal people to control the entire discussion.** Consider hiring a professional facilitator who will be able to keep the discussion balanced and ensure that everyone who wants to be heard gets an opportunity to voice their opinions.
- **Use your stakeholder list** to compile your invitation list. Make sure you include all those who are important to the success of your library.
- **Determine where the meeting will be held.** If you have adequate facilities, you may want to host it at the library. Or, you may want to partner with a business or a local school with room for large sessions or breakout sessions (depending on the format you use). In any case, the location should be convenient for key stakeholders.

