2016

On Leadership

Richard Naylor
Past editor, JLAMS, rnaylor@live.com

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**Author Information**
Richard Naylor is the Past Editor of JLAMS and contributes a column on leadership issues

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On Leadership

In addressing the JLAMS issue theme of library facilities serving our twenty-first century communities and their needs, Richard Naylor interviewed Timothy Burke. Burke, who has been the Executive Director of the Upper Hudson Library System since 2010, served as interim director of the Albany Public Library from March 2007 to July 2009, a period that coincided with the construction of two new branches and the multimillion-dollar renovation of three others.

An overview of the Albany Public Library’s construction project is available from the blog of the Library Trustees Association of New York:

“As of June 2010, the Albany Public Library (APL) completed the $29.1 million Branch Improvement Plan—the first comprehensive infrastructure project in its history. The plan involved renovating three existing branches—Pine Hills, Delaware, and John A. Howe—along with constructing two new branches—John J. Bach and Arbor Hill/West Hill. Albany voters showed support for the plan in 2007 when they overwhelmingly approved a referendum to fund the relocation, renovation, and construction of five branch libraries in the city. The new libraries opened to the public between November 2009 and June 2010. The project to build and renovate Albany’s branch libraries was named “best use of public funds” by Metroland magazine in 2010. Albany Public Library was given the 2010 Organization of the Year Award from the Neighborhood Resource Center for its “incredibly transformative work in our city neighborhoods” through the new libraries.

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION

These state-of-the-art, fully accessible branch libraries include community meeting spaces; expanded collection spaces for adults, teens, and children; public computing areas for adults, teens, and children; indoor and outdoor gardens; and small group tutoring/study rooms. All of these features were suggested by the community through an extensive input process that formed the foundation of the plan.

The three renovation projects were designed by the Albany-based architectural firm of CS Arch and were built by Latham-based Bunkoff General Contractors. The two new building projects were designed by Hom & Goldman architects of New York City and were built by Albany-based Sano-Rubin Construction, Inc.
Authority of the State of New York (DASNY) was project manager at all five projects in the Branch Improvement Plan.

“GREEN” BUILDINGS

APL is committed to “green” branch libraries that are energy efficient, environmentally responsible, and healthy for customers and staff. Green building is the best, most responsible use of taxpayers’ money because energy efficient libraries are more cost effective to operate and healthier for the environment. The renovation and building projects utilized green design and construction principles, techniques, materials, and furnishings. All five buildings are being evaluated by the U.S. Green Building Council in pursuit of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) designations. The three renovated buildings are expected to achieve LEED certified status, while the two new buildings are planned to achieve LEED silver status.

Interview with Tim Burke: May 9 2015

Do you have a leadership philosophy? “Basically my philosophy is really about having a good team, inspiring that team to understand why we’re doing what we’re doing, and at that point let the team do their work.” I think the inspiration and the team building goes on all the time. It is a constant effort. You’re always going to have different people coming to the team so you are always working on developing that and I think really that’s the key, having that team and getting it behind one idea and moving it forward.

So when you talk about a team how deep does that go? Do you have meetings with everybody or do you have a special executive group? I think of it a little more ethereally. In some ways the teams is the staff here at UHLS. This is the group I am charged specifically to lead. And yes, we do meet regularly, talk about what we’re doing, and how we’re staying on the same page. But by extension, the bigger team is the member libraries of Upper Hudson and those Directors and the staff there. I don’t have the arrogance of thinking that I’m leading all of those people but we’re all trying to get everybody to work together, so bringing the Directors in and trying to get them to get behind an idea is my part of that leadership.

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1 Italics indicates question or comment from Richard Naylor, the interviewer.
JLAMS, the online journal of NYLA’s Leadership and Management Section, has published articles and sponsored programs about managing from the middle so that you can be a leader from all positions, this seems to be a very good orientation ... “Absolutely because it is about inspiring people around you to get something done. And you can do that from any level in an organization. Just remember that you’re almost never going to have a completely cohesive team in which every moving part is working perfectly. If you do ever have it, you should thank your lucky stars and say this is great, but don’t get used to it because it is not going to last.

You’ve been a director of a municipal public library and were intimately involved with the major projects of Albany Public Library’s (APL) building and renovation of branches and you’ve been a System Director for a number of years so next to inspiration and team building what other skills do you think are of major importance? I think a good leader has to be optimistic. no matter what else is happening. You have to believe in what you are doing and believe that you and your team can make a difference. I think it is pretty easy in public libraries to feel that we’re making a difference. That is one of my favorite things about working in public libraries -- that we make a difference every day. So being optimistic about what we’re doing and the direction we’re going, no matter what reality is trying to put in front of us is important. Just to be clear, that doesn’t mean blind optimism. It just means that we can get through this, get past this, make it better, and if we don’t help fix the problem, then we are just part of the problem. It’s not false optimism. I truly believed that that building project at APL was going to make a real difference for the people of every one of those communities and for the city as a whole, so it was easy to stand up in front of a group of people and say ‘this is why you should do this’.

You just mentioned standing up in front of a group of people, how does that fit in with leadership, because that is a skill”. I think it’s a critical element to being a leader. You don’t have to be a polished presenter. You don’t have to be ‘Steve Jobs’ but you do have to be able to confidently stand up in front of a group of people, regardless of the size and context and deliver a message to help them understand why something is important. Jeff Cannell and I just finished co-teaching the Public Libraries class in the UAlbany graduate program for the second year and one of the things we stress over and over with these future public librarians is that you need to get better at public speaking or presentation. It doesn't have to be your favorite thing but you have to be able to do it with a reasonable degree of confidence because it is going to part of your life’s work, whatever type of public librarianship you decide to go in. Public presentations are important and I think the skills are absolutely learnable and can be practiced by everybody, and every time you practice you get better. But I think the thing that makes the most difference in whether a presentation is successful or not is the level of confidence you bring to it, confidence in yourself and confidence in your message.

Any advice to anybody who finds that difficult, how they might get better at that? The two things we most often tell people to do are first, find a couple of tiers of role models. Pick a couple of
people even celebrities or politicians and watch what they do and how they do it, but don’t set the bar too high. Also pick a couple of people who are just a little ahead of you. Every time you have an opportunity to listen to a colleague present, obviously you want to listen to what they are saying, but also pay attention to how they do it.

Watching a TED talk might be a good idea but it would seem with a live presentation you can also watch the audience and see how they respond. Yes, TED talks are good but in some ways, especially for the high bar role models, but they are almost intimidatingly good because then, if you not so sure of yourself and you watch this amazing person, you might say ‘forget it, I can’t ever do that!’. Whereas if you watch your colleague in the next cubicle who has to do this or another librarian from another library, as when you go to a conference presentation, … you see a range of skills and you see what’s wrong also … correct, And the second thing is to practice, practice, practice. Take every opportunity you can to speak in front of people, even if it is really hard.

Can you also speak about good preparation? Absolutely. You know, there are very few people, and I don’t know if I’ve met any, who can just get out of bed, be handed a topic and really be good at it. … Just to throw this in, I just read part of the book titled “Peak” by Ericsson and Poole about how to be higher performing and basic lesson is that the people that get way at the top always worked really hard. They put in the top tier of effort in learning their skill. … Yes, Now, some people like to practice by themselves in a room to go over a talk, but I find that personally unnatural. I rehearse by taking different parts of a talk and going through them in my head when I’m driving, doing yard work, etc. and eventually before the event it kind of comes together and I know what I’m saying and how I am going to say it. But that’s what works for me…everyone has to find what works best for them. Again, none of the stuff I do is a magic bullet. And it’s certainly not secret. It wasn’t learned from a book. It was learned from lots of experiences and observation of people.

You’ve seen the field change to some extent. You might envision libraries in the past as being centered, but closed on themselves with people going in but not so much outreach. So do you think the skills to run a library have changed? Have the leaders changed? I do think the skill set for the ideal library director has changed. Twenty-five years ago it was very much about organization, collection management, budgeting, and human resources. I would argue that you still have to manage your collections and your organizational structure and your finances, but particularly in a public library setting, the other piece of this now is what you said, the looking outward, the connection to the community, the realization that a public library can be, not a “community center”, but a “center of community.” And how do you make that center of community a reality? You can’t do it by expecting people to know about the library and just come in your doors. You’re going to get some people that way but you have to go out and find the people, find the connections, find the reasons for the community to look at the library, and come to the library, to use the library
and to help the library do what it needs to do. ... And you’re talking from the perspective of a medium size city. ... Yes, nationwide, APL is a medium size library but it is in a state capital, so it has that. But I don’t think there is a lot of difference, other than the scale between the largest and the smallest libraries, the concepts are still the same. It’s finding out what the community needs and how the library can participate in giving that to the community. We need to make our libraries essential so when it comes time to vote for a budget, or to vote for a legislator who is going to support a library budget, people will say, ‘oh, libraries are important, I can’t imagine my community without a library’. And if you can get there with most people in your community, you’re going to be in pretty good shape.

Let’s move a little into the construction that you did at APL and space or structure issues. At APL you had a major change and lots of disruption.” When I got to APL in 2003 as Assistant Director we were pretty much right away starting to talk about the next thing. The rechartering as a tax supported library had just been completed so the Library was saying, ok, so now we have our stable funding source so now we have to look at our facilities and try to figure out how we could maximize them to benefit the community. Most of the branch locations were pretty marginal in terms of size, design, and utility. We didn’t own some of them. Jeff Cannell was the Director at that point and he was absolutely the point person on this, the leader, and I came onto the team and we started working together and we put some other people on the team and we took some time to get the Board invested in it. We had some issues. We had the replacement or complete renovation of the main library in the mix initially. And that first study gave us a number of upwards of $65 million on the table in front of the public in such a way that really set us back a bit because the public reacted very negatively to it. We had some specific public reaction from the mayor who said in the media ‘$65 million, that’s crazy’. Which was obviously really damaging to the case we were trying to build. We learned a lesson about how important it was to constantly manage your information, how important it is to manage your message, and make sure that things come out exactly the way you want all the time.

What would you have done differently to avoid that negative reaction? We worked with a consultant, an architect, and a library planner to look at the whole package. We assessed where we were and where we wanted to be and they came up with a recommended plan for branches and a main library and the architect took a pretty broad brush stroke. … So were they making their ‘dream library’ and not looking at the political landscape? … No, I don’t think so. They were just doing their jobs. It was like they said, ‘If you want good library service for the city, this is what you should have’. The Library leadership’s job is to take the expert advice and weigh the political realities and then communicate the library’s vision to the community in a way that is compelling for them and convinces them to support it. The library board is a big piece of this process. Our whole leadership group was not very sophisticated in terms of message management and public relations for that large a community campaign. And that was the lesson we had to learn the hard way…always, always manage your message and don’t take anything for granted. What you say
everywhere matters. Who you say it to matters. We ended up learning from that lesson, backtracking, and saying ok, the political realities dictate that a project encompassing the main library and the branches is just too big for people to swallow all at once. We really wanted to do it all because that was the best model for library service in the city, but we couldn’t do it all…at least not all at once.

_Do you think you could have gotten that information ahead of time? … You mean without failing? … Yes, I think so but as much as you may want to know ‘what do you think the community will support for a library building project,’” the reality is there is no way to know for sure…until you count all the votes. Failure is not necessarily failure but rather a speed-bump where you learn something and say ok, this is what we need to do now. So what we did was we decided just do the branches, keep the main library as is, and prove to the community in the long term that we were right about the importance of library service, that library service in these new branch buildings can make a difference for the community, it is worth the money, and that we can responsibly manage a project of this scale, on time and on budget.

_You had the macro decisions of configuring the scope of the project but you also had smaller decisions about keeping buildings, building new, deciding where to locate the new branches, restoration questions … how did you deal with those kinds of things?_ You have to know going in that all of that is a just a feature of the landscape. It’s something you’re going to deal with all the time. The people you hear from in these projects generally care about their community, but many times they have specific ideas about what should or shouldn’t happen in their community. In just about every one of our locations in the Branch Improvement Plan, and it was five different projects, two new buildings and three renovations, there were issues about site selection, about historic restoration or replacement issues, neighborhood boundaries questions, etc. The Arbor Hill branch was one in which we had a lot of locations to look at and the specific political realities were questions about going too far east down the hill toward the Ten Broeck triangle or staying on Henry Johnson Boulevard which was pretty close to the Main Library, or going too far into West Hill, which goes essentially all the way out to Essex Street. How could we do that with one location? We knew we were not going to be able to add another branch building to the mix, so it was a challenge for sure. But in other ways this was the easiest branch project because these neighborhoods desperately wanted a library and had felt pushed aside and ignored for so long and we knew we were going to give them their own library. It’s critically important to accept that you’re not going to keep everybody completely happy, but you do have to get to a point where you feel that you’ve made your case to the community and you’re benefiting the community as much as you can.

_Can you do all that with internal staff or do you need an outside consultant?_ I think if the organization has a strong and established connections with the community and is sophisticated enough to have good message management, you may be able to do it on your own. But I do think
it’s important to take an honest assessment of your organizational strengths and weaknesses and recognize where you might need to bring in some outside expertise, whether it is paid or volunteer. I stress the honest assessment part, because you’re building this library for the first time and there are some experts out there who have done much of this work successfully in other communities, sometimes you need that experience at your table.

And remember, it is not a one shot deal. If you ask the community once and it gets shot down, you can ask again. You can learn from your previous experience, you can modify the plan, you can think about it in a different way, and decide to ask again. I think that circles back to the optimism thing and also highlights that you need to be persistent. Keep your eyes on the prize and the stick to your guns because you know that what you are doing is important and it is going to make a difference. And in the end it is absolutely worth everything you’re going to have to go through, including all those speed-bumps.

One more area. The staff issues, the internal management of that whole process. You’re making a lot of changes. You may have employees that are not going to be totally on board and are difficult to get on board. How do you deal with that and what skill sets do you need? Well, here’s a news flash….change is hard. And even if it’s good change, like new library facilities, a lot of people are still going to be anxious about it -- it is disruptive. I think having a strong team is an important tool to successfully manage change. In my example, I was also fortunate to have earned a reputation among the APL staff as someone who listens. That was really important. I was in the position of Assistant Director for several years up until the time the community approved the $29 million building project referendum. Within a couple weeks of that successful vote, Jeff left to take a position with the State and I was appointed interim director. I was interim director for almost the entire project and I think the reputation I had earned with the staff as someone who listened to them and who genuinely cared about their ideas and opinions really helped us to move the project forward as a team, because people trusted me.

So do you need to deal with the problem of building trust before you start such a project? Having that trust in place is fundamental to a successful organization. I wouldn't say that, if you don’t have good relations with the staff then you shouldn’t build a building, but it’s going to be a lot harder. And getting everybody on board is a big part of just getting started. Again, change is going to be hard. People are going to complain. People are going to throw up roadblocks and you just have to deal with them. It’s about that persistence, about keeping your eyes on the prize. You will need to figure out a way to make it work. Because you need them. The staff is the front line and the public face of the organization.
Sources cited
