

Nyack Library Staff and Trustee Interview Summary and Recommendations November 2022



**Prepared By
Leslie Burger
Library Development Solutions**

Project Overview

The Nyack Library Board engaged Leslie Burger, Partner, Library Development Solutions, to assess the library climate following disruption caused by the pandemic, the departure of the library director, and a contentious public election for library trustees. Many on the Board felt that this work was particularly important in advance of hiring a new library director and hoped that this work would reassure the library staff that the Board was interested in their ideas and concerns.

The Interview Process

Most of the staff interviews took place in July and August 2022. Despite vacation schedules everyone on staff responded to my scheduling requests and took the time to talk even if it meant coming in on their day off.

To make the scheduling easier, I created a master calendar with proposed interview dates and a list of staff and asked each of the department managers to help schedule their department employees. After a bit of back and forth we were able to get most of the employees scheduled for in-person interviews.

Each interview lasted 30 minutes +/- depending on how much the employee had to say. Considering that most staff had met me only once at the “kick-off” meeting in June they were candid and forthcoming with their ideas and concerns, and offered constructive suggestions regarding the qualities, attributes and skills needed for the library’s next leader.

Some employees used their time to vent about the previous director, their interactions with her and the impact on the library’s customers service and staff. Everyone – from pages to department heads to administrative staff -- appreciated the opportunity to be heard. Most of them mentioned being pleased that the Board of Trustees had invested in this effort.

The interview structure consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage a free flow of ideas. It was structured around three topics:

- 1. What works well at the Nyack Library? What are you most proud about?**
- 2. What doesn’t work and why not?**
- 3. What skills and qualities do you want to see in the library’s next leader?**

The following is a summary of responses to each question. The numbers in parentheses are the number of individuals who mentioned this item.

The Nyack Library: What Works Well?

I asked each person to tell me what works well at Nyack Library and share those things about which they were particularly proud. It was a good way to open the conversation on a positive note and to have each person focus on the positive qualities of the library. **In each of the categories below I’ve highlighted the top five items that were my takeaways from our discussions.** My full interview notes are included in **Attachment 1**.

Staff

- Library staff is a key component of the library’s success.

- The staff is customer focused and goes out of their way to be helpful and friendly to everyone using the library and to provide exceptional service.
- Staff are invested in the library. Many of them live in Nyack and feel a sense of responsibility to their friends and neighbors.
- Staff love what they do, support each other, and have a strong work ethic.
- Good hiring has created a team of talented colleagues who are flexible, helpful, and willing to step in when needed.

The Library

- The library's mission is meaningful, important in today's world.
- The library is amazing! It's a fun place to work, the building is beautiful, and easy to navigate.
- The library has an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome, a great central location and is connected to the community.
- The collection, services, programs, and customer service are top-notch.
- The library makes the community a better place – it is a place where people of all ages and perspectives can gather, meet, and interact freely.

The Work Environment

- Nyack Library fits well with the community's vibe, a free spirit and friendly environment
- The union – it has helped increase salaries and given staff a collective voice to share concerns and grievances
- A balance between micromanagement/routine that's essential in circulation communication, particularly in some departments, like circulation, and enabling staff to try new things
- Everyone on staff wants to help people get what they need
- The decision to hire an interim director provides a calming effect to deal with impact of Covid and the issues associated with the previous director

What Doesn't Work?

The opportunity to have this conversation with a neutral person provided an opportunity for the “venting” needed after the departure of the former director and the trauma associated with operating in a COVID environment. I suspect that some of these items mentioned have been addressed under Ed Falcone's leadership during these last few months.

But some of the issues that surfaced during our discussion are more systemic and long-term concerns that need to be acknowledged and resolved.

Communication

Internal communication was a major concern for many staff members and was cited as the root cause for many of the issues that have surfaced in the last few years. Whatever communication structure was in place pre-Covid was disrupted during the pandemic. There is no staff intranet, where messages can be easily posted and shared, in place.

One of the communication casualties was the suspension of the “morning meeting”, a brief pre-opening meeting where the entire staff would gather to share information. Associated with the loss of morning meeting was a sense that communication among the Board, director and staff is

lacking as well. The result is that staff don't feel heard and don't always function well as a team because of this information/communication gap.

Most significantly, there is a perception that the communication between the Board and staff is contentious if not openly hostile.

Staff Training and Development

There are three generations currently working in the library – Generation Z, Millennials, and Baby Boomers. Each of those generations comes to the workplace with their own approach to work, communication and interaction. Managing a multi-generational workforce creates many challenges – differences in the way in which people communicate, digital natives vs. digital immigrants, structure vs no-structure, and so on.

In today's library everyone, regardless of age or generation, must be proficient in the use of technology for business purposes and assisting those using the library with computers, personal devices, and downloading content. It is essential that the library invest in training those staff members whose lack of proficiency with technology prevents them from providing exceptional service.

The library budget should include a healthy amount of funding to support staff attendance at outside training events, regional, state, and national conferences. An annual staff development day would provide an ideal opportunity to bring in experts or trainers who can work with the entire staff on a themed training topics such as customer service, building community partnerships, and equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Try a Little Tenderness

Everyone who works at the library wants to contribute to its success. Sometimes the way to build a team and more investment in the work is to focus on some of the softer parts of a healthy work culture. As one interviewee put it – happy staff=happy customers. That means a director, board, and department managers who are empathetic, interested in the personal lives of staff members, celebrates milestones and accomplishments, and ask for staff input. It might mean monthly birthday celebrations, an occasional happy hour, a staff development day. The idea is to recognize staff for who they are and what they do. Even more important than how you organize people is how you treat them.

Build the Team, Create Meaningful Work and Provide Opportunities for Professional Growth

One of the complaints I heard often was the perception that staff feel unheard and unvalued. It doesn't appear that there is a strong sense of team or a strong partnership between staff, the director, and the board.

Staff shared concerns about low morale, lack of advancement opportunities, perceived or real unequal treatment of employees, and lack of recognition for their contributions. Although the union creates some restrictions in terms of compensation and advancement there are other things that should be considered to support a more collegial work environment. The new Access Services Department was a poorly executed attempt at reorganization to provide more work variety but unfortunately it was not presented successfully.

Libraries have to rethink the work that employees do today – is it something that we need to do in house (cataloging, processing, ordering, IT, payroll, etc.) or are these things that could be off loaded to a vendor/supplier to free up staff to do more engaging work – program planning, community outreach, offsite story times, visits to homebound, book discussion groups, information advocacy - the list is only limited by one's imagination. Traditional reference is no longer relevant in a world where all the information we need is available online. Checking out books manually can be done now at a kiosk. It means that library staff can be retrained and redeployed to do the work needed in the library of the future. Compensation can be adjusted to address additional responsibilities and the library can invest in training and education to help make the transition.

Because of the significant number of hours the library is open and the number of service points there is heavy reliance on part-time staff members. Part time workers provide more flexibility with staffing; however, it is important to consider how best to provide part-time workers with enough hours to feel invested in the library. In addition, having many part-timers on the payroll increases payroll costs. Consideration should be given to setting a minimum number of hours per week for each part time staff member to routinize coverage.

Address Physical, Organizational and Operational Issues

Addressing some of the library's organizational and operational issues is something that should go hand in hand with the move toward redefined work responsibilities.

There is no doubt that Nyack Library is a beautiful facility. However, it is physically difficult to navigate and staff. Due to the additions and floor level changes there are more service desks than would be found in other libraries. That is further complicated by the three entrances to the building.

The Facility

Consider consolidating service points which would then require less desk staffing and create more opportunity for other work. For example, closing computer resource center (more on that later), removing the service desk and consolidating all check out and information requests at the existing checkout location would cut down on the need to have service points always staffed. Self-check kiosks can also be installed in key locations like the parking lot entrance. By reducing the number of service desks staff can be reassigned to other more rewarding work that was highlighted in the previous section.

Due to the building layout there is a need for a comprehensive look at wayfinding and signage. As some staff observed, people easily lose their way when trying to navigate the building.

Although there are lovely areas throughout the library for reading and work there are other areas that feel neglected. The "Café" adjacent to the Reference Area feels abandoned and unwelcoming. This area could be repurposed for small gatherings (book discussions, small group tech instructions, poetry readings, art talks, etc.) and the service counter could be repurposed as a staff service point.

With more people working from home, the library can provide great workspace for tele-commuters and promote itself as a place where people can book small meeting rooms, get hi-speed, reliable Internet and drop-free WiFi, printing, copying, scanning and other business

services. The existing computer resource center appears to be underutilized and could be repurposed as a shared workspace with small meeting rooms and related business services.

Create areas where people can gather inside and outside on the lower level by adding seats, tables and umbrellas in the outdoor area adjacent to the teen room. People of all ages can gather there during nice weather, including staff.

Install café tables and seats in the area outside the teen room. Several of the teen staff members suggested that more teens would gather at the library if it offered more of a café atmosphere.

Consider opening the teen area as another space available to adults to work until the kids arrive after school. Closed, unoccupied public spaces send a negative message.

Depending on security concerns, you may also want to consider closing the Carnegie Library entrance.

Invest in Technology and Software that Works

Today every library is technology dependent. Staff observed that there are inefficient and clunky processes in place for meeting room management, managing desk schedules, openings and closings, lack of communication about programs and a program calendar, and a lack of a staff intranet. All these issues can be addressed with the purchase of readily available [software](#) customized for library use. In addition, enhancements to Nyack Library website like a search box would improve searchability for both the staff and community.

Institute a technology replacement for both customers and staff. The computers currently in use in the Computer Resource Center are old and lack current software upgrades. Nyack Library, particularly, if it embraces its “work here” approach for hybrid or home-based workers, should provide access to computers and software that might not be affordable for individuals to purchase on their own. Included in the software list is Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Cloud, Apple Pro Software and Coding Software. The library should include iMacs along with PCs, laptops and tablets.

Close the existing computer resource center, reimagine the space, staff it, and rename it, for example The Tech Marketplace. Remove the existing service desk and computers. Relocate the Friends Book Store to another area of the library where it is near a service point where customers can pay for their books. An obvious place is adjacent to the checkout desk.

Add several small, glass walled meeting rooms with seating for 4-6 people. Many vendors offer easy to install walls. Replace the doors on the existing tutoring rooms with glass and improve ventilation.

Create a “memory lab”, a dedicated space where people can come to scan their photos and documents from analog to digital format. Purchase laptops and a charging cart that can be used for tech training led by staff or outside experts. Training topics should focus on learning how to use specific apps such as GoogleSuite, GoogleSite, Canva, photo sharing, Google tips and tricks, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Digital Marketing, Family History, Online Marketplaces, etc.

Reactivate the current Maker Space which seems to have morphed into another meeting room. Assess the current equipment inventory to identify gaps and/or dispose of obsolete items, purchase additional equipment needed to animate the space and create a schedule of “maker” focused programs.

Offer Exciting and Engaging Programs to Entice People Back to the Library

Nyack Library has an excellent reputation for delivering high-quality library programs that attract large audiences. But since Covid the staff has been struggling to get the public programming back on track. The Program Librarian position is currently vacant. When that position is finally filled (and it doesn't require someone with an MLS to fill it) expand the program effort to involve more staff. A library-wide program committee, comprised of people from all departments, would provide opportunities to surface new ideas and engage staff in program development. Some libraries are continuing a hybrid program model (in-person and via zoom) to enable more participation and accommodate those who are not yet comfortable at in-person events.

What Needs to Change?

I finished our interviews by asking each person to tell me what they think needs to change to make the library more effective. As you can see from the list in Attachment 1 there was no shortage of suggestions. Many of these ideas were also mentioned in response to the previous questions but the fact that they were mentioned repeatedly reinforces that these are being discussed by staff and present opportunities that are ripe to address.

It would be an understatement to say that the last three years have been difficult for the Nyack Library Board and staff. Covid and its impact on individual and institutional life and resulting disruption in library service was one major factor. But the relationship between the former director and staff led to a poor work environment. The staff's perception of lack of support from the Board of Trustees along with failures in communication and lack of strong day-to-day leadership left plenty of room for speculation and blame that impacted working conditions, interpersonal relationships, and service to the community.

There is no need to dwell on the past except to say that it is important to remedy any mistakes that were made, rebuild relationships, establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, and move forward with a shared vision and plan for an exceptional Nyack Library, that is the pride of the community.

The good news is that important investments have been made toward the rebuilding goal.

- A “cooling off” period that started with the appointment of the interim director has provided a role model of effective leadership for the staff and put some distance between them and the previous director.
- The Board's investment in assessing the current climate, providing opportunities for every staff member to talk to a neutral, outside consultant was helpful and informative in terms of what actions will help improve the library and the workplace. As evidenced by the narrative in previous section of this report there was no shortage of ideas.

- The Board's decision to seek assistance in hiring the next library director has added credibility to the effort and provides them with the professional advice and screening to ensure that the best candidate for the position is selected.

In the meantime, here are recommendations based on the time I've spent in the library talking to staff, observing use, and thinking about your space, the community and the library they want and deserve.

Repair the Board and Staff Relationship

There is currently an unhealthy disconnect between the staff and Board. It seems to have been simmering for some time related to the unionization effort and subsequent negotiations. Instead of collaboration and each group doing what it does best – the Board setting policy, advocacy, dealing with financial matters, contract negotiation and the administration and staff – operating the library, developing new ideas to engage the community – there is an underlying confrontational atmosphere that distracts from the work that should be going on in the library.

With an elected Board, Nyack Library has only some control over who is elected to the Board. Together, the director and a Board Nominating Committee should think strategically in advance of each election to determine what skills and qualities are needed on the Board and approach people who can fulfill that need. Here's the good news about Nyack, the community members are concerned about the library because they love it and want it to be better. Tap into that energy and get a Board that can focus on the big picture.

The Board is already looking at its bylaws and considering things like term limits and that's a good thing. Board turnover is important and ensures a constant flow of fresh ideas and wipes out past resentments and slights.

Union negotiations will always be difficult, they're set up to be that way until finally resolved. If Board members are not equipped to negotiate on behalf of the library then engage an impartial negotiator.

Get to know the staff for what they do. One way to do this would be to establish a monthly "staff spotlight" at each Board meeting. The staff person can talk for a short time about what they do at the library, what inspires them about their work, and share any new ideas they may have. This is a way for them to get to know the Board and for the Board to gain greater understanding about the work that is taking place at the library.

You may also want to consider the establishment of a formal staff liaison to the Board. Someone whose role is to come to Board meetings to hear first-hand about what's going on and to take that information back to the staff. Separate and unrelated consider the appointment of two "teen liaisons" to the Board who can provide feedback from the teen perspective and in return learn invaluable lessons about the importance of civic participation.

Make sure that every single Board member is operating with the same information, with an agreed set of rules and values. Schedule an annual Board retreat to review the work of the previous year, identify challenges for the years ahead and annual goals. Ensure that new Board members are properly onboarded – that might be an orientation session with the director and board, a written board manual, informational materials that provide an overview of the last

few years, a library tour, a financial overview and any other information that brings new members up to speed quickly.

Keep Everyone's Focus on the Community, All the Time

The most recently completed long range plan fulfills all the New York State Library requirements but it lacks a vitally important statement. The Board, director and staff need to agree on a shared vision for the future, a statement that expresses in clear language your dream for Nyack Library and its place in the community

Along with that you need a mission statement, another statement that succinctly represents who you are, what you do and why you do it. Without these basic building blocks your plan becomes simply a to-do list without being grounded in some larger aspiration for the future.

In addition, the library staff need to continually monitor the needs of customers and the greater community and adapt library services to meet those needs. That may mean adjusting hours, offering programs and events that bring the entire community together, and creating more visibility at the library by building stronger partnerships with community organizations and stepping up outreach efforts.

Rethink the Collection

The pandemic taught us that library customers can discover digital content, download it to their devices and enjoy it. As the mix between digital, print and other formats continues to evolve, the staff should be thinking about the collection and how best to allocate its collection budget. That means continually monitoring collection use, eliminating legacy collections such as books-on-tape, books-on-CD, music CDs, DVDs, and other older and rapidly disappearing formats. Remove outdated non-fiction books and evaluate which, if any, subject areas no longer need investment because print information become obsolete to quickly, e.g., medicine and disease, computer guides, etc. Continue to downsize non-circulating "reference collection". When collections are reduced, remove the existing shelving and replace with it with more casual seating and workspace.

Staff for the Future and Compensate Fairly

As job responsibilities and use of the library changes it is important to realign job titles and responsibilities. Revisit all current job descriptions and update the language and responsibilities to reflect the new library reality. For now, there is a need for staff who can function as technology assistants, collection guides, program assistants, and customer service/concierges. When recruiting for open positions try to hire people who have Spanish or Haitian Creole language skills. Nyack Library, in partnership with the union, without the constraints of civil service job titles, can become the most innovative and experimental staffing paradigm in the area.

As allowed by the union contract consider monetary rewards to incentivize staff. For example, provide across the board end-of-the-year bonuses for everyone to recognize their contribution to the library's success. The amount doesn't have to be large to make a difference.

There has been a great deal of conversation about low compensation at the library. A market study should be completed to determine how Nyack Library salaries compare to other similarly sized libraries (peers) in Rockland, Orange, and Westchester counties.

The director along with a Board representative, as needed, should meet with the Union Reps monthly to address any issues that emerge and try to resolve them before they escalate to the grievance level.

Launch an equity, diversity and inclusion initiative that involves staff and Board. This initiative would identify ways to promote EDI in the workplace including being aware of unconscious bias, communicating the importance of managing bias, promoting pay equity, developing a strategic training program, and celebrating the diverse cultural backgrounds that make up Nyack.

Provide funding for staff attendance at local, regional, statewide and national library conferences and continuing education events. There is a lot to be learned and brought back to Nyack from these gatherings.

Consider offering other employee perks - free parking in an adjacent downtown lot, gift cards to acknowledge something well done, monthly birthday celebrations, an annual holiday party, annual staff development day, and other things that acknowledge their work and reward them in small and inexpensive ways for a job well done.

The goal here is to make Nyack Library a desirable and coveted place to work.

Grow the Library's Budget to Support Operational Improvements and Capital Investment

The goal of reducing the library's capital debt prior to an escalation in interest and balancing the annual budget needs to support service has created some tension. The Board is wise in its thinking about the debt but needs to remain sensitive to the annual investment needed to operate the library at a high performing level. Conversations with the director are essential to get to the annual operational support needed for day-to-day operations. The good news is that Nyack loves its library and repeatedly votes in favor of budget increases.

Consider other ways to retire some of the capital debt. One possibility is to sell the DePew House and use the proceeds to pay down debt. Another option, once the library is back on better footing with the community, is to launch a "Pay Down the Debt Campaign" to solicit significant gifts and donations to retire the debt.

Repair the Library and Community Relationship

The results and aftermath of the February 2022 Board election has soured relations with many members of the community and created an image problem. As stated previously, the good news is that the community cares about the library and wants it to be better. That means that all interactions between Board members and between Board members, the staff and community should be civil, polite and respectful. All Board members need to commit to a set of shared values and behaviors that guide the life of the Board. The Board also needs to establish a gatekeeper role for internal and external communication and designate only one person as the spokesperson for the Board.

Skills And Qualities Desired for The Next Library Director/Leader

During each **staff interview** I reframed the complaints about previous directors into positive qualities you should be looking for in your next director. These are summarized below and ranked by frequency of mention.

1. **Excellent and consistent written and oral communicator.** Ability to think on their feet and respond quickly, on the spot. Builds rapport with customers and staff. Holds regular staff and department head meetings; reinstates the morning meeting. Walks around daily and interacts with all staff. Talks to all staff and encourages information sharing. Encourages ideas from every staff member, including part-timers. (26)
2. **Strong, capable, intelligent leader and team builder who works closely with library department managers and employees to create a high-performing team.** Consults with others and seeks advice. Practices situational leadership. Possesses strong executive skills. Customer service focused, excellent crisis management skills, and cheerleader-in-chief for the Nyack Library, and passionate about the work we do. (26)
3. A visionary leader who persuades others to share that vision, gets staff excited about new possibilities, and secures buy-in for implementation. An innovator and risk taker who is open to new ideas. (21)
4. **Represents the library to the community and is comfortable with and familiar in working with a diverse population.** Able to repair previously damaged community partnerships and create new partnerships to get people back to the library. Knowledgeable about the community or, if not, willing to immerse themselves in the community to build strong partnerships and relationships. Comfortable with people who don't look like them. Appreciates diversity and is committed to EDI. Street smart and able to easily read people. Consider hiring a person of color. (16)
5. **Empathetic and flexible.** (13)
6. **Good listener, approachable, even-tempered, respectful and appreciative, trusting and trustworthy.** (13)
7. **Open to and welcomes new ideas.** A creative thinker who thinks outside of the "box" likes to have fun, understands contemporary practices in libraries and likes to have fun. Progressive in outlook and values. A person who is not afraid to let go of legacy collections or services. A proven change agent who is open to and embraces change and can persuade entrenched employees to try new things.(11)
8. **Supports a collaborative approach to problem solving, encourages shared decision-making, and considers suggestions.** Recognizes good ideas and helps turn them into action. (11)
9. **Enjoys interacting with staff and makes everyone feel comfortable.** Spends time outside of the director's office and walks around the public service areas. Friendly and approachable. Interested in staff members, knows their talents and skills, or provides development opportunities to increase skills levels. Values talents of all full and part-time staff. Listens to staff concerns and advocates for staff with the Board and in the community. (9)
10. **A creative, big picture person who trusts employees** to do their job and doesn't micromanage. (9)

11. **Ability to work with the union in a positive way**, negotiate on behalf of management, and respond to staff interests and concerns.(7)
12. **Confident, has a sense of humor**. Likes to have fun, calm and cool demeanor, friendly. (7)
13. Considers the impact of proposed organizational changes, anticipates, and reduces staff resistance. (4)
14. Easily delegates to department heads and other staff members. (4)
15. Fair-minded, respectful, and approachable. (3)
16. Advocates for improved staff salaries and wages, hours, etc. Able to balance budget with staffing and operational needs. (3)
17. Provides and creates opportunities for staff development and career advancement. Approachable. (3)
18. Previous supervisory, management or leadership experience in a library. Knowledge of or direct experience with facilities management and capital improvement planning. (2)
19. Tech savvy and understands the application of technology in libraries. (2)
20. Possesses an artsy “vibe”. (1)
21. Able to work in partnership with the Board of Trustees, staff and community groups and community members to advance the library. (1)
22. Knowledgeable about human resource management. (1)

Trustee Recommendations for the Next Library Director

These additional qualities and skills for the director were identified by the Trustees.

- A competent manager with great skills
- Proven track record of project management
- Sustainability mindset
- A person who can solve problems and think big
- Experienced with union negotiations
- Previous director experience and leadership experience; this isn't the place to learn on the job
- Approachable, levelheaded and empathetic
- Experience as a senior manager, human resource experience
- Ability to work collaboratively with the Board and staff
- Excellent communicator

