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## Making the Leap to Being a Law Library Director

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# Trends

IN LAW LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

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*Edited by Philip C. Berwick ♦ For academic, firm, corporate, and government law librarians*

## **Making the Leap to Being a Law Library Director**

*By* JOSEPH A. CUSTER, Assistant Professor of Law and Director, Omer Poos  
Law Library, Saint Louis University Law School

**T**his article addresses my experience in going from being a mild-mannered Associate Director of an academic law library to that of a dynamic leader of an academic law library. While I do enjoy hyperbole, I should stop right here and tell you that I'm pretty much the same person I was before I became a Director. I didn't undergo any cognitive self-transformation after I accepted the position to be the new Assistant Professor of Law and Director of the Omer Poos Law Library at Saint Louis University Law School, none that I am aware of anyway. What I did bring to the job was what all of you who are seeking to make the move one day will do and those of you who have already made the move have already done, and that is to bring your own experience, knowledge, abilities and skills to the position.

### **Strategic Planning**

One thing I would advocate for a new Law Library Director is to start your new job with an approach that is uniquely you; an approach that makes sense to you and one in which you are comfortable. I was very comfortable with the situation I was heading into at Saint Louis University. Fortunately for me, the previous Director, Mark Bernstein, had brought in an outside facilitator in 2008 (less than a year before he departed for the Directorship at Drexel Law School Library) to conduct a retreat on a new course of strategic planning for the Saint Louis University Omer Poos Law Library. This approach to managing a law library made sense to me because back in the year 2000, I had done the same thing for the University of Kansas Wheat Law library.

At the time, I was the Associate Director of the Wheat Law Library at the University of Kansas Law School and had done significant reading about the strategic planning process. I had received the approval from our Law Library Director and Dean to bring in a facilitator to address our law library mission, goals, and vision. From that retreat the Wheat Law Library created a strategic planning committee, and then the committee shared in the effort of creating our own strategic planning document.

At Omer Poos Law Library, Director Bernstein drafted the strategic planning document after the retreat was held, over the holiday break. He then ran it by the other librarians on the staff. A committee had not been formed when Mark was offered the job at Drexel. The law library staff at Omer Poos Law Library decided the best course of action would be to table the process until a new full-time Director was hired. Richard Amelung became the Acting Interim Director for the next year.

### **Climate Survey**

It was a year after that, in July of 2010, when I started at Saint Louis University. Since the law library had already started on their strategic planning effort, I

wanted to take full advantage of their hard work. I told the law library when I interviewed for the position that I would take the document that was already in existence and we would work together to update it. We would then create a strategic planning committee to implement the goals, strategies, and vision that the law library had laid out. By the time I arrived, I had taken an MBA course<sup>1</sup> and discovered an impressive 360-degree evaluation tool called the climate survey. In my initial meeting with the whole staff on the first day of my new job, I told the staff I would be meeting individually with each of them and would then distribute a climate survey (described below) for them to fill out anonymously.

Meeting individually with everyone on the staff was a very important step and laid the foundation for me. I told the staff that anything they told me in confidence would remain as such. After the conclusion of the individual meetings, I presented the climate survey directions at a staff meeting. I told the staff it was an organizational evaluation instrument,<sup>2</sup> a 360-degree assessment tool, which would give a snapshot of the law library at that given point in time. I explained that in assessing the survey<sup>3</sup> it will be broken down first by departments and then by librarian and non-librarian.

I explained that the survey was not about how well the particular departments were doing in the law library compared to any other department, but rather it was an introspective evaluation tool we were going to use to learn more about the law library and its most important resource, the people who work in it. It was explained that the focus will not be on finding the problems in the law library, but rather discovering opportunities to get better.

First of all, the survey solicited the opinions of the whole staff on the following issues: 1. Communication; 2. Customer service; 3. Decision-making; 4. Diversity; 5. Leadership; 6. Morale; 7. Performance management; 8. Teamwork; 9. Training and development; and 10. Vision, values, business practices and mission. I tallied the results myself. There was some filtering involved in evaluating the results because, while people were encouraged to give their opinions, a very small minority did so in a pointed and blaming way that was not

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conducive to anything of value in moving forward. The final results were shared in a staff meeting. Four people on the staff came to my office afterwards to discuss the results, and several others commented briefly on them. There was no negative backlash of any kind, and most of the comments were very positive.

The results provided an understanding of how the employees perceived the law library along the ten different dimensions stated above. It was helpful to upper management (speaking for myself) to understand how management was perceived. The results also provided helpful feedback on the internal health of the law library, not only to me but to everyone. This paper will not go into the specifics of the impressions of those on our law library staff, but suffice it to say that we did learn quite a bit about ourselves.

One aspect that I will mention, because it had an immediate influence on how we were to proceed, is the fact that the librarians, as a group, perceived the ten dimensions rather differently than the rest of the staff. While a reader may suspect that this means that one of the two groups had a more negative impression of the health of the law library, I am not making that claim. I prefer to describe it as two different views on the climate of the law library, and I took this very seriously. I decided to change the make-up of the soon-to-be-created strategic planning committee from one that was going to consist of senior management librarians and department heads to one that was a mixture of library management and staff who are not librarians in order to help explore these two different perspectives on the law library.

Before leaving the topic of climate surveys I want to list the eight steps that I think are involved in conducting one: 1. Get senior management committed to the survey initiative and tell them what you intend to do with the results. 2. Involve everyone on the staff equally. 3. Chose survey topics that can be acted upon. 4. When developing, use everyday language in the questionnaire. Each employee should be able to understand and relate to the questions. 5. Responses should be submitted anonymously. 6. Communicate both good and bad results to the employees. 7. Present planned actions to employees. 8. Repeat the survey to see whether attitudes change (optional).

## **In Conclusion**

After completing the climate survey and sharing the results, forming the strategic planning committee and updating the strategic planning document, the law library was ready in January of 2011 to start the implementation of the first phase of the strategic planning process. It has been almost a year since we began implementing the document, and things are going well. Every six months, for the first eighteen months, there has been another round of implemented goals and strategies. The next implementation phase will begin in January 2012 with a half-day retreat in the law library. The strategic planning document is a living document that will guide our law library for the years to come, just as the one at the Wheat Law Library has done since the start of its first implementation back in 2001.

Not everything about being a new Director can or should be neatly wrapped up into what I have just briefly described. There are other things I could mention, but I've already exceeded my word limit. To conclude, the bottom line for me in becoming a new Director has been making use of individual meetings, the climate survey, the strategic planning document and its implementation through the leadership of the strategic planning committee. Establishing these processes were the most important decisions I made in becoming a new Director. I am not saying this should be a model for everyone, but it was a good model for me in that it came from my prior experience and from knowledge I had gained in a MBA class. In other words, it was unique to me and I was comfortable with it.

## **Notes**

1. MGMT 736—Managing People: Applications and Skills. Spring 2009. University of Kansas MBA program. Lawrence, Kansas.

2. Brian Hunt & Toni Ivergard, Organizational Climate and Workplace Efficiency—Learning from Performance Measurement in a Public-Sector Cadre Organization, 9 *Public Management Rev.* 27 (2007).

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3. Claire Bahamon, *Creating a Work Climate That Motivates Staff and Improves Performance, II The Manager I* (2002).

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