

Scott Garrison and Jennifer E. Nutefall

Start by interviewing every librarian and staff member

A first step for the new director

One of the biggest questions a new library director faces is “How will this library move forward successfully?” Before asking that question, the director needs to understand how the library organization has evolved over time, and where it is currently. Objective data and information about budget, collections, space, and technology are important sources for a current read on a library. However, the single most important asset to a properly functioning knowledge organization is its people. It is extremely important for a new library director to get to know each person he or she will work with, and equally important for library staff to know their director.

People in organizations, including directors, bring a complex mix of work history, communication styles and preferences, personal values, beliefs, relationships, conflicts, and other experiences with them to work every day. All of these things can influence how people behave toward and interact with each other, and especially each other's ideas. The process of learning each person's facets and nuances takes time.

One important step a new director can take to start the “getting to know you” process is to meet with every person who works in the library, one on one, and pose questions that draw out each person's experience, values, and thoughts about where the library is, and where it should go in the future. Individual interviews also serve as an opportunity for every person to learn about the new director and allow staff to pose questions they may have.

Business literature, such as Michael Watkins' book *The First 90 Days*,¹ suggests it is essential for new leaders to spend their first weeks and months with a new organization focused on learning about the organization and its people, in order to function successfully. Many refer to this process as *onboarding*.²

As two new library directors who began in 2012 at Ferris State University and Santa Clara University, we each spent a large proportion of our onboarding time interviewing everyone who worked in our respective libraries. Peter Hernon's³ and Barbara L. Dewey's⁴ research on library directors also validates this approach. They articulate the benefits of individual meetings as an opportunity for staff to meet the new director in an informal setting and allow the new director to interact with each staff member, learning about their work, challenges, issues, and hopes for the future. We each found our investments of time and energy in beginning to build relationships with our libraries' people invaluable as we completed our first year as directors in 2013.

One of the greatest benefits to spending time with every person in our respective libraries has been establishing an atmo-

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sphere in which we engage everyone in our libraries about how we should move forward together regarding vision, mission, core values, strategic planning, and leadership.

We each began to schedule staff interviews in the first two weeks on the job. We had seen or met many of our people during the interview process, interacting with a few between accepting the position and starting work, and we both started by saying hello to as many people as possible on arrival.

Scott Garrison scheduled interviews in “neutral” locations, such as the Ferris State library’s sunken garden and upper outdoor balconies as much as possible, rather than his own or each staff member’s office or work area, for two reasons. First, there may be less of a dynamic of power or territory in a neutral space. Second, Ferris State’s outdoor library spaces had not traditionally been accessible to most people. Some staff commented that using those spaces was a refreshing, new experience to them.

Using such spaces may indicate a new director’s willingness to think beyond traditional limitations. Because many of her staff never interacted with her predecessor, and her office is very personalized, Jennifer Nutefall scheduled interviews in her office. This established a sense of approachability that may not have existed before, and allowed people to get a sense of who their director is and what her interests are. Both approaches inspired some staff to ask us questions about ourselves, whether in response to our questions, or observations in the interview setting.

Garrison had consulted a mentor to develop a list of questions, and Nutefall used a modified version of this list. We customized some questions by personal preference or priority. In both our cases, each interview ranged from about 30-to-60 minutes. While Nutefall distributed questions in advance to allow staff to reflect and prepare (which some did, even going so far as preparing and sharing written responses

in advance of the interview), Garrison did not, collecting what came most readily to each person’s mind in the moment.

The questions

The following list of questions were asked in our staff interviews. (Common questions appear in regular text, Garrison’s are in bold, and Nutefall’s are in italics.)

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, how long you’ve been at our institution, what you like and don’t like about your job, **and what you like to do when not at work.**

2. What are a few words or phrases you’d use to describe yourself? *What would you say are your strengths and areas for development?*

3. What values do you bring to work with you (whether personal, or professional)?

4. Please tell me what your job entails day to day. Are there tasks or functions you wish you could either start or stop doing?

5. What are some things you think our library does well, and not well, now? What is the one thing you most wish will happen at our library within the next 2-3 years?

6. What are your expectations of me as [director]?

7a. How well do you think the recent reorganization is working, and do you have any thoughts on how it might’ve been done differently, knowing what you know now?

7b. How connected is the library to the university? In what ways do you see the library advancing the university’s strategic plan?

8a. If our library could have new positions, what would your top three position priorities be and why?

8b. What do I need to know about [our institution] to be successful?

9. What questions do you have for me?

After compiling the results from our set of interviews, Garrison found numerous common responses to many of the questions. He presented these themes at

an all-staff meeting, representing common words and phrases from each question's responses as word clouds. This approach didn't especially resonate with most staff, but it was a simple way to visualize dominant ideas. Nutefall shared the themes she found with her supervisor.

In addition to getting to know our libraries' people and endeavoring to become engaged and engaging leaders, we feel that the interviews helped establish us as approachable people who are open to ideas from anywhere in the organization. Exchanging at least some knowledge with each person helped establish trust.

Garrison believed that his interviews made later processes, such as developing new core values, mission, and vision statements, more successful than they might otherwise have been. Having asked everyone in his library about values, he used both large and small group meetings to refine large concepts into specific points and statements using just a few questions.

Nutefall believed that her interview process established a set of priorities on which she could follow through. During her interviews she outlined an inclusive strategic planning process for the library. The strategic plan was completed in July 2013 and included many opportunities for staff input and feedback, demonstrating her commitment and seeking to build trust. Having found success with the initial interview process, Nutefall completed a second set of individual interviews in which she asked each of her staff to tell her how they felt she had done in her first year at her library, and how she could continue to improve in her job.

While it may seem more efficient to conduct first meetings with people in small groups, not everyone may feel comfortable speaking in a group setting, as some may be introverted, others may dominate the conversation, etc. Meeting people one on one gives everyone a chance to offer any thoughts they wish without fear of reproach or retaliation. It also disregards

past conflict between colleagues that could prevent the new director from hearing each person's true opinions and ideas.

Our advice for new directors in selecting a location for individual interviews is to consider your personal preference and your library's past history and culture. Would it be best to go to a neutral location inside or outside the library? Meet the staff in their workspaces? Have them come to your office? Or meet in a location that takes others' individual preferences into account? What tone do you want to set while conducting the interviews, and how do you want to distinguish yourself from previous directors?

Before starting the interviews, consider how you will use the information shared. Will it be kept confidential? Will you share a summary/overview with staff or your supervisor? How might you address specific themes that emerge? Also, consider what you are and are not prepared to share about yourself with your new library. Are there any topics or questions that are out of bounds? How will you deal with any such things that arise, either from your end or others'?

Since many of the staff have served through one or more previous directors, we each learned a lot about the history of our libraries. Director turnover was more frequent at Garrison's library than at Nutefall's, and each setting featured unique sets of expectations. It's important to listen and learn about your library's history while working to set a new tone and expectations. You will likely need to respond to comments about or expectations set by your predecessor(s); consider carefully how you'll do so, both in words and actions, and the messages those responses will convey to staff.

Finally, the meetings allowed us to hear what staff saw as opportunities for change and how open they were to it. Every director comes in with ideas about change,

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As you design your retreat, use facilitation tactics to create activities that will invite participation from all attendees.

Make sure to include different types so that you provide opportunities for engaging both introverted and extroverted participants. These can include:

- Have a large group brainstorm session.
- Have small group brainstorm sessions, and then have group leaders report back.
- Post ideas on large sticky note sheets around the room and have participants write comments on individual small sticky notes and stick them on the pages (the size of the paper will limit the length of their responses).
 - Post ideas on large sticky note sheets and have participants vote or mark on them in some way.
 - Have small groups analyze and synthesize the ideas that are posted and report their findings.
 - Show a multimedia clip, and have participants write a response to the clip and give them to the facilitator, who will then share them with entire group for discussion.
 - Give each participant multicolored cards to write responses to various questions, such as describing one way the library

(“Start by interviewing . . .” *cont. from page 248*)

but it is important to understand a library’s tolerance for change, which may vary widely between individual librarians and staff. In our experience, considering change within a larger framework, such as an inclusive process to create a fresh set of values, mission, vision, and strategic planning, helps those who are not ready for change begin to consider it for the future.

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will be different in two, five, and ten years. Synthesize by questions and discuss, either as a large group or in small groups that report back to the larger group.

Conclusion

We found the retreats to be well worth the time and effort. We created a strong group identity from our shared time together analyzing the work we do and, because we thought about what the future will bring, we all have a view of the road ahead and the big changes coming for libraries. Taking the time away from our regular activities can seem daunting to some and wasteful to others. But in our experience, it was worth every minute.

Acknowledgements

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Note

1. “Seth Godin: This is broken,” video on TED.com. (n.d.), accessed at www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_this_is_broken_1.html. *ZZ*

at their libraries as a first step in the onboarding process.

Notes

1. Michael Watkins, *The first 90 days: Critical success strategies for new leaders at all levels* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2003).
2. “That tricky first 100 days: Executive onboarding,” *The Economist* 380, no. 8486 (2006): 65.
3. Peter Heron, “Becoming a university library director,” *Library and Information Science Research* 33, no. 4 (2011): 276–83.
4. Barbara L. Dewey, “In transition: The special nature of leadership change,” *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 1 (2012): 133–44. *ZZ*