



12 Steps for Making Your Library Better

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January is resolution time. Everywhere you turn you'll find tips and tricks for making — and keeping — resolutions to make you your best self ever. The New Year gives us an opportunity to make changes, firm up resolve, try new things, and generally set off into the future on the right foot.

But while you're pondering "Diets that Really Work" and "10 Great Ideas for Organizing Your Home," why not look at ways you can resolve to make this year the best ever for your library? The New Year is a perfect time to look at what you're doing, what you want to be doing, and how you can get there. It is a great opportunity to try new things and to reconsider the way you, and your community, view your library.

We've developed the following twelve "resolutions" to help you start thinking about your library in new ways. Our goal is to create more community-centered libraries and librarians, and the focus in the resolutions below is on how you can continue turning your library into a vital and involved community institution.

We've organized these resolutions so that they start with a reorientation of the way we approach our jobs; move on to specific ways to do our jobs, and then end with advocacy and attitude. They all take work, and some take a radical rethinking of how we see ourselves and our institutions, and how we prioritize our day-to-day jobs. In some cases, adopting a resolution in order to make your library thrive as a community-centered institution will mean reconsidering job duties, reorganizing your structure, or reevaluating your mission. In other cases, adopting a resolution will mean getting out of your library and into your community in new ways. Often, it will mean venturing out of your comfort zone, challenging your employees, or pushing your local politicians.

All of this is hard work, and we know that some libraries are already struggling with budget cuts and staff shortages, among many other challenges. If your library is stretched thin, get creative in how you approach these resolutions. You may need to reconsider what you're doing and let go of what is obsolete or doesn't serve your community anymore. That way, you can make room for what is relevant and truly beneficial to the people you serve. Remember, just like all the diet and fitness advice we see this time of year, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for libraries. Give yourself permission to only do what works for your community. So, let's start this New Year with energy and vision! A great way to begin is to check out these suggestions for moving your library forward one month (or step) at a time.

- 1. You're not in it for the information.** Libraries will always be about information, but we need to start prioritizing the fact that we're also in the community building business. Feed kids, collaborate with local organizations, help people find jobs, consider how you can affect the social climate of your community. Yes, we offer books and computers but we offer a heck of a lot more, and our worth will increasingly be in what we can offer our communities to help them grow and thrive.

2. **Worry less about trends and more about your community.** In our struggle to make libraries' relevance evident to all, we need to be sure that we are not hopping on (and off) ever bandwagon that shows up in library journals and conferences. Not every library needs a makerspace or an e-reader lending program. But every community does need thoughtful librarians who take the time to assess their community and discover creative ways to serve their patrons. It's good to be aware of current trends in libraries so you can imagine the possibilities, but just because something is getting a lot of buzz doesn't mean it's the right fit for the unique collection of people who make up your community.
3. **Stick the surveys in a drawer and get out into the community.** Surveys are one tool for gathering feedback, and when used judiciously they can be helpful. But if we depend solely on surveys to paint an accurate picture, we will end up with a narrow and shallow view of our communities. Surveys also limit the potential responses you can solicit and do little to encourage creative thinking. A better option is to combine your survey results with robust involvement in the community. Join organizations, serve on committees, and talk to people whenever possible. Librarians who are embedded in the work and concerns of a community have a much better view of their patrons' lives, needs, and interests than those looking at statistics collected from a survey.
4. **Hire for vision and fit, not skills.** In our experience, it is much more important to find library staff members who believe in the mission and vision of the library, and who can adapt easily into the culture of public programming and outreach, than it is to find someone who perfectly matches the technical skill set you want. New hires can always be trained to do library tasks. So in interviews, look for the softer skills like ability to think creatively and critically, willingness to work flexible schedules in order to accommodate outreach, and a true belief in the philosophy of libraries as community engagement institutions. These qualities, not just a technical understanding of libraries, are the most important when it comes to creating community-centered institutions.
5. **Make programming a job requirement.** To create a truly community-centered library, you need to provide opportunities for people to connect, explore, and learn together. Assigning this job to one person won't work. It takes a team to offer the variety and volume of events that should happen in a library, especially if that library wants to be a true hub of the city or town. Some libraries have dedicated programming librarians, and we are huge supporters of having someone in that role to plan the majority of events and coordinate other staff members involved in programming. Still, we feel that it is essential that every librarian hired for the library's full-time staff be eager and willing to participate in these activities. Perhaps your reference librarian would like to offer some technology classes, or your head of circulation would love to share his or her gardening knowledge. Time off the desk to do different things is good for your staff and benefits patrons too. With a greater number of programmers, programs can happen at a wide variety of times, and cover a broader selection of topics. Both of these things add up to reaching more community members.
6. **Use what you have...and find what you don't.** Limited funding, space issues, constantly changing technologies...so what? You have what you need: staff, patrons, and community. Among them are grant writers, creative minds, and specialized skills for sharing. All you need to do is ask, make a plan, and get to work. In other words, stop getting hung up on those things that are a struggle for all libraries, and do something!
7. **Learn a new skill.** Just because you don't know how to do something now, doesn't mean you can't learn. Sign up for an introductory class, attend a workshop (and we don't mean at a library conference or library consortium!), or develop a new hobby. Learn to do something that will help make your library the best it can be. For example (directors, we're talking to you), allow your staff members the time to do things like take graphic design classes to improve library publicity; get certified in yoga instruction so that they

can teach classes to kids at the library; or attend weekend classes to learn things like silk screening or quilting, so that they can offer library programs on those topics. Why outsource web design and PR, or hire presenters multiple times, when you can train staff members once and get these jobs done in-house? In addition, staff members will stick around longer because with the variety of skills they get to explore at work, they will never get bored with their jobs! This is a move that is good for your community and also generates enthusiasm in your staff.

8. **Remember the magic.** Remember watching *Sesame Street* and learning about community helpers? Looking at libraries through the eyes of a child can help bring you back to basics in terms of both what we do (introduce people—including kids—to books and the world) and why it is so important (is there a more magical time than story hour?). It is so easy to get overwhelmed with the day-to-day operations of a library not to mention the budgetary and political pressures often involved in our work. Why not organize a “community helper” day in your library for kids and their parents. Invite teacher, firefighters, postal workers, bakers — anyone who contributes to your community. Encourage them to talk about not just what they do, but how what they do contributes to the community...and join in. It will be a great way to remind yourself of the good work you’re doing, share that enthusiasm with other “community helpers,” and reconnect with the essence of library services.
9. **Be political.** One of libraries’ greatest strengths is that they are non-partisan. However, they can’t afford to be apolitical. Librarians need to be involved in local politics, not to negate their role as equitable institutions, but to join in the critical conversations of their communities. Develop relationships with politicians and don’t be afraid to let them know how their actions affect the people you serve. When a sticky community issue presents itself, offer the library as a partner to help tackle it. In addition to serving your community in a valuable way, if you are seen as a problem solver, you will be much less vulnerable when it comes to budget cuts and will have more leverage if you need community support for a capital project. Be proactive now so that the groundwork is in place when you need it.
10. **Claim your seat.** Once you get political, make sure that you are advocating for libraries all the time. And when you have a spot at the table, don’t waste the opportunity. Always make sure you have something to say, and be willing to say it! Get yourself on agendas — at city council meetings, one-on-one meetings with the mayor, business council or Chamber of Commerce meetings, and social organizations. Give updates about the library, even if no one asks for them. Show up prepared, highlight what you do for the community, and don’t be afraid to ask for support.
11. **Send library advocates out into the world.** It can be a great morale booster to hear someone from outside the library rave about how wonderful libraries are. But every time one of these speakers presents the keynote at a conference, we can’t help but think it would be more valuable to libraries to send these super fans to talk to stakeholders, funders, and others who aren’t librarians. Librarians already love libraries. Let’s send our supporters out into the world to spread the gospel of libraries far and wide.
12. **Don’t be content with just patting yourself on the back.** Libraries are great. Your library is doing wonderful things for your patrons and your community and you are changing lives. But don’t be satisfied with where you are today. Resting on our laurels won’t get us anywhere. We must continue to grow with and for our communities. Challenge yourself to go farther, do more, and do it better. Be willing to be critical of the way things are. We’re not talking about being negative and nitpicking, but rather about honestly assessing the ways libraries can improve. Be attentive when you receive constructive criticism from patrons and stakeholders. In face, seek out those who can tell you the truth about what the library could be doing better. Community-centered libraries must be forward thinking. Enjoy today’s success, but always ask yourself “What’s next?”