

Using Basic Rules to Win Management Support

by Judith Meadows

Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Carol Avery Nicholson at 919/962-1199 or carol_nicholson@unc.edu.

I suspect that there are many law librarians who find themselves in the following situation:

- A library that increasingly depends on automation.
- Reliance on a technology staff that does not report to the library director and has other priorities.
- An unwillingness to alienate the larger organization's other senior staff members by pushing for total autonomy.

The State Law Library of Montana was in that position for years. This article will describe our situation, and how I was able to have a new position—electronic services librarian—added to our staff by following three basic management rules:

1. Be able to identify what library functions are unmet, and how that hurts the library's operations and its services to customers.
2. Align yourself with the person who directs the larger organization's technology staff. Make that person your ally, who can argue for your needs rather than opposing your requests.
3. Remember that it is easiest to not fight the good fight alone.

I realize that most readers of this article do not share with me the special challenges of being funded during a 90-day biennial legislative session with elected representatives who not only don't use law libraries or understand their uniqueness, but also are loathe to add new positions to state government. The strategies of convincing decision-makers can be applied to any work environment, however, and I hope that my experience can help others.

Although the State Law Library of Montana is an independent agency of

the Judiciary, it relies on the Office of the Court Administrator for assistance in the areas of payroll processing, online payments, and technology support. About five years ago the state legislature approved funding for the Court to automate the district courts. The money, which came from a surcharge on district court filing fees, amounted to almost one million dollars a year, and provided for the hiring of ten programmers and technicians who would be hired immediately.

I was very supportive of this special funding bill when it was introduced, and excited that the new staff also would be responsible for support of the law library's technical needs. I even was so bold as to suggest to the Court Administrator that one of the technicians actually be assigned full time to the library. Of course that idea was not seriously considered by anyone other than me. And over the next year, it was very apparent that we were not going to get any more help than we ever had, because the priorities of the Court's automation staff were the district courts around the state. Whenever I would ask for more help, I was told that the funding bill stipulated support for the district courts, not the law library.

Meanwhile, our technical needs were growing exponentially. The library's first integrated automated system (which ran on OS/2!), CD-ROMs, Internet and e-mail access, and Web page maintenance all demanded more and more time. No other offices of the judiciary relied on, or even used, any of these programs. The law library was always far out in front of the others in terms of automation. In fact, one of the court technicians told me once that he preferred working with us, because what we did was so much more interesting and demanding than his other work. I suspect he also liked the fact that when he came down to the library we

greeted him with bows, applause, and offers of candy and flowers! Most of the court's technology team simply did not understand why it was that when something needed to be worked on in the law library, it could not wait. They were not accountable to a public constituency, or customers whose needs were sometimes desperate. Our relationship with the technology staff reminds me of the following joke:

A man flying in a hot air balloon realizes that he is lost. He reduces his altitude, and spots a man on the ground. He lowers the balloon further and shouts, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

The man below says, "Yes. You're in a hot air balloon, hovering 30 feet above this field."

"You must work in technology," the balloonist says.

"I do," replies the man. "How did you know?"

"Well," says the balloonist, "everything you have told me is technically correct, but it's no darn use to anyone."

The man on the ground responded with, "You must work in business."

"I do. How did you know?"

"Well, you don't know where the heck you are, or where the heck you're going, but you expect me to be able to help. You're in the same position you were before we met, only now it's my fault!"

Our situation was not exactly that of the businessman, however. We did know where we were, and had a very clear idea of where we wanted to go.

The number of law library staff members had remained at seven people for more than a dozen years, despite the fact that all our user statistics had at least doubled during that time period. Not only were

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we busier, and using more and more technology, but our customer base was shifting. We found ourselves serving more and more non-law-educated people, who of course took much more time to help. I had attempted to get legislative approval for additional staff by myself, asking for no assistance from the court administrator. I had not been successful. Obviously a different tactic was required.

Although the library's board of trustees is the entire Montana Supreme Court, I meet on a routine basis with a library committee that is composed of three of the Associate Justices and myself. I started inviting the Court Administrator—the Judiciary's chief legislative lobbyist—to our meetings. I began to build my case, using the statistics that we so very carefully gathered. The Court Administrator came to the realization that his staff had neither the time nor the ability to take care of all our automation needs, and that the best solution would be to have another professional added to the library's staff. The committee worked as a team to come to the decision that we would request the creation of a new position for electronic assistance for the law library. We talked to the Chief Justice, who was fully supportive of our decision. This became a major "plank" in the Judiciary's legislative program, rather than one that stood alone.

When the Legislature came into session, we were ready. Our request stood out as one that was fully justified, and even was included in the Chief Justice's State of the Judiciary Report. The time for my direct appeal to our Appropriations Committee came. You think meeting with a dean or a firm administrator is a challenge? I had to communicate our mission and needs to two ranchers, a glazier, a nurse educator, an innkeeper, and an owner of a small business. I very carefully laid out the environment in which we work and the tools that help us help our customers. I acknowledged that it seemed contradictory to be requesting both additional funding for book inflation and an extra professional to assist with electronic information. I explained that the only way I was going to be able to

eventually stop asking for larger book budgets was to have the full-time assistance of a professional who would help us create the online library.

The hearing closed, and the following day, when the committee members took executive action on the Judiciary's budget, it postponed a decision on my request. This was a good sign, as the group had not voted against it. The Court Administrator then took over. Whenever he had the opportunity to buttonhole a legislator and discuss the judiciary's needs, he talked about the library's request. The committee eventually voted

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to approve the new library position. The recommendation sailed through both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and survived the Governor's scrutiny. When all the dust settled, our request was still intact, and I had both the funding and new F.T.E. (which is government talk for full time position).

In the spring of 1997, we decided on the new position's title and wrote the job description for our electronic services librarian. Part of this step was to make a staff decision as to the qualifications for the person we would be looking for. I was concerned that by requiring an MLS, we might not be able to hire someone with the experience we needed for administering a network, selecting hardware, loading software upgrades, and the myriad other responsibilities the person would have. The rest of the staff, however, was very convincing in justifying why we needed a "real librarian." They were adamant that a librarian would be the only one to have the background and credentials to understand how both our internal and external customers use information.

Our job description stated a preference for a law degree, as we knew that we also needed help with our reference workload.

We advertised the position, and recruited during the AALL Annual Meeting in Baltimore. I set the salary to be competitive on a national level, knowing that we would be competing with other libraries across the United States for someone with the skills, experience, and aptitude we were looking for. We quickly learned that there weren't many of these special people around. We had to hope that the unique challenges of working in a public law library coupled with the beauty and popularity of Montana would do the trick. And luckily our wishes were fulfilled!

The strategies used during the year that led up to hiring our new librarian were these:

- Be able to identify what library functions are unmet, and how that hurts the library's operations and its services to customers.
- Align yourself with the person who directs the larger organization's technology staff. Make that person your ally, who can argue for your needs rather than opposing your requests.
- Remember that it is easiest to not fight the good fight alone.

This scenario played out in 1997. Our new librarian has been in her position now for a year and a half. My entire staff and I are delighted with her capabilities, resilience, and indomitability. Do we have everything we need? Absolutely not. All three conditions listed at the beginning of this article still exist, yet we are much better off than we were. You will have to wait until next month to read the rest of our story! Next month's PDC feature will be written by Lisa Mecklenberg, the person we hired for our new position. She will describe for you what it is like to make up a job as she goes along, day-by-day.

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