

Managing Multi-Location Libraries

by Mark E. Estes

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 Susan Siebers at 312/902-5675 or susan.siebers@kmz.com.

Managing multiple office libraries reminds me of motorcycling: Once rolling, the gyroscopic effect tends to keep the motorcycle upright. But, once out of an empty parking lot, the motorcyclist faces many threats to riding safely. Success in the face of those many challenges requires constant attention and focus just like in the law firm. Start with the culture of the law firm and all of its offices. Does your firm use “headquarters and branch offices” or are all offices equal? What is the strategic purpose and role of the other offices and their libraries? Does the office exist to create a presence for the firm in an area of economic growth? Does it serve a significant client or industry of the firm? Was it built from scratch or was it formed by raiding or merging with another firm? Is the library little more than a collection of books? Is it one that you developed yourself? Is it one that came with a merger? Thus, within that cultural context, the library director strives to keep the collection, services, and activities of the library aligned with the business purposes of the firm.

A successful team begins with good members. Years ago, Marian Gallagher suggested these requirements for new law librarians:

Industrious
Charming
Attentive to detail
Imaginative
Unafraid of briefing for a judge or getting filthy while shifting books
Dependable
Amusing
Cheerful
Diplomatic
Summa cum laude

Strategies for Building the Virtual Team

The lynchpin for maintaining that alignment and for providing outstanding library service is the library staff. While crucial in any library, the multi-location library staff plays an even more important role than those in the single office library. The librarians in each office provide the human contact and personalized service

that distinguishes your library from all of the other information sources available to individuals in your firm. While one office may have more library staff than another, each librarian must behave consistently for the library to succeed in its mission.

The multi-location library resembles a virtual team. Each has members working on the same project or mission in several locations. There are many resources about managing virtual teams (see the resources at the end of this article). My favorite though, remains *Virtual Leadership: Secrets from the Round Table for the Multi-Site Manager* by Jaclyn Kostner. In this short, very readable, and enjoyable work, Jim Smith, a modern day manager, confers with the legendary King Arthur of Camelot about the challenges facing the multi-location manager. Through a conversation spanning several days, Arthur tells many stories about his successes and failures managing Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table. Through these stories, Arthur shares his insights for the multi-location manager:

- build clear communication—through the use of visual images, physical props, verbal plans, procedures, analysis—to clarify partnerships and restate the message, and communicate regularly to all team members;
- build trust in your leadership, in the organization and in all staff members;
- build strong symbols that emphasize the mutual benefits of the organization, that bring people together—physically or virtually and emotionally;
- build knowledge of all the staff: create opportunities for people to problem solve and work on projects together; and respect each suggestion or idea equally;
- build the intellectual and emotional links to keep focus and motivation and create an alignment tool to keep work efforts aligned;
- build consistency in treating all team members: rely on remote and local ones equally; give everyone an opportunity to excel; confront poor performance remotely and locally.

Communication Strategies

Implicit in each of the principles is communication. Successful communication for the multi-location manager requires multiple approaches. King Arthur used face-to-face meetings, carrier pigeons, and couriers. We have similar options, in addition to the face-to-face meetings. Multi-location staff can meet by telephone conference calls or video conferences. Instead of pigeons and couriers, we use e-mail, telephone, or inter-office mail. Regardless of the method, the goal in communicating to both remote and local staff is to keep your vision clearly understood by your staff. One way to measure your effectiveness in communicating the vision is a short exercise during a firm-wide library staff meeting (teleconference or videoconference is okay). Ask everyone to spend a few minutes writing down five goals for the group/library. Next, record the goals of one person on a flipchart, followed by the rest—using hash marks for duplicate goals. At the end of the exercise, compare what the staff says is important with what you thought you had been telling them.

King Arthur emphasized the value of face-to-face meetings. Multi-location library managers should heed that advice. Schedule an all-staff meeting at least once a year or whenever you embark on a major initiative. Ideally, this meeting occurs away from other distractions such as the AALL Annual Meeting. (During AALL you want them networking with other librarians.) In addition to the annual staff meeting, technology permits us to schedule regular staff meetings with telephone or video-conference connections to the other offices. Depending on the number of time zones you are in, monthly or weekly meetings may be appropriate. Keep the meeting focused by using an agenda document that includes not only the agenda, but also has a place for notes from each meeting. (See www.aallnet.org/pdc/resources/staff_agenda.htm for a sample format.) Encourage everyone to place items on the agenda—including questions/topics for you to address at the meeting.

Where Arthur used different colored carrier pigeons to indicate the urgency of a message, we have e-mail with different levels of priority. Establish the expected

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response time for each of the possible priority levels. If the firm's technology supports it, build an internal e-mail list to discuss library issues. If the technology does not support such a list, create almost the same effect by using a group address and by encouraging everyone to pose questions and answers to that address, etc. Teach everyone to use rules to put the library messages into a special folder.

Within the office, physical actions can obviously encourage communication: an open door, no barrier between the visitor and you, turning to the visitor, putting work down, declining to answer a phone call, etc. But how does a librarian in another office see your open door? They cannot, so you must take a more active role in creating the image of an open door: by promptly returning phone calls or e-mails. When on the phone with a remote librarian, engage in some of the same sort of small talk done within the office. In addition, fully engage with your colleague. Don't try to read e-mail, approve invoices, etc. Focus on them in just the way you focus on someone in your office. Use a mirror, or a picture that reflects an image, to remind you to focus on your colleague.

Treat the distance librarians as you do the physically close ones. If you walk around the office each morning with your coffee and engage everyone in a little bit of small talk, then call or e-mail those staff members in other offices. Build effective communication through the trust that each of them has equal access to you. King Arthur told Jim that his real problems with Lancelot were that Lancelot was local. Arthur could easily consult with Lancelot on anything because Lancelot lived at Camelot. All the other knights had their own castles. The other knights resented that Lancelot was always the first consulted because he was physically near to Arthur. The moral: Remember to routinely consult with everyone, not just those down the hall from you.

To help you maintain your commitment to communicate with the remote librarians, establish a routine of when you will contact them so you identify current or future challenges before they reach the crisis level. Knowing the challenge in advance enables you to plan a solution rather than merely reacting. Perhaps you can even convert this routine into an opportunity to improve customer service

while controlling costs and increasing revenue. It is important to get this information from the other offices because they each encounter different reference questions and different information problems. The more you as manager know about the challenges facing your librarians and customers, the more effective your plans can be for the entire enterprise.

With hard work and attention to King Arthur's insights, the successful multi-location library manager continues to build the team that supplies outstanding customer service and value to the law firm.

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Mark Estes is the instructor for the full-day AALL Professional Development Program, "Managing Multi-Location Libraries." To register for the September 22, 2000, session in New York City, or to find out how you can bring this program to your location, visit <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/>.

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