

Greg Baker  
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### An Interview with a Librarian

Instead of interviewing a library director, I thought it would be more advantageous to talk to a school librarian. I am following the school library program path so I figured an interview with a public library director would not be as relevant. I decided to go back to my alma mater Schaumburg High School and talk to the head librarian Sue Elk. Because I am familiar with the curriculum and staff at Schaumburg, I was better able to understand what questions to ask. This familiarity also helped me comprehend Mrs. Elk's answers because I had a good idea of where she is coming from.

When I set up the interview, I let her know we would be discussing mostly communication, leadership, and a little bit about learning organizations. We started by talking about communication in general. First I asked her about the challenges she encounters when trying to communicate with the diverse population in the school. On any given day the school librarian has to talk to students, teachers, faculty, district staff, and people from the community. She has come to the realization that she has to change the way she communicates based on the receiver. For example, when talking to the principal she has to be more to the point and fact heavy while she can be more informal with the teachers and students. She told me that there are two very important things to remember when communicating in the school.

The first of these things is patience. Not everyone in the school, especially the students, communicates in the same way and that can be very frustrating. She reminded me that sometimes you have to step back and think about not only what you want to say, but also how

you need to say it. The most difficult part of her work with other schools in the district and the community is the breakdown of communication. One example she gave was in regards to communicating with a librarian in another school in the district. For the most part, the librarians in the district keep each other up to date with what is happening in their schools and share ideas that might be helpful. However, there is one librarian who will do something completely out of nowhere and not tell anyone what she did or why. This lack of communication makes the other librarians jobs more difficult because they are always trying to guess what she is happening in her school. The second issue she runs into is that teachers like to talk in “code.” It can take a long time to cut through the jargon and decipher exactly what a teacher needs. She has learned that she needs to know what questions to ask in order to find out what the teacher really needs.

Once we established the importance of and challenges with communication, I steered the conversation towards leadership. I asked Mrs. Elk what role leadership plays in her position. She told me that she sees two types of leaders, those that are outspoken leaders, and those that lead through action. People like her take leadership roles by speaking up and guiding meeting conversations towards a particular goal or vision. She said that often she is looked to as the leader because she is willing to bring up ideas and questions. Often other people in her school and in the district will bring their ideas to her. This is because they are confident that she will take on others that oppose those ideas.

On the other hand, she mentioned that there are others who prefer to lead by example. These people are more likely to take action and let others follow in their footsteps. They are not as comfortable speaking up in front of a group, but are unmatched when it comes to bringing a plan to fruition. Regardless of their style, she emphasized that solid leadership is crucial for the success of schools. Either way, communication is still the most important part of being a leader.

We talked briefly about how important it is for the librarian to be able to communicate with a myriad of different people in order to be a successful leader. The ability to read people and adapt your communication to every individual person will in the end make you more effective as a leader. She gave the example of the difference between the former principal and her successor. The former principal was more of a relater type who liked to get to be emotionally invested in the school. Mrs. Elk knew that the best way to get the principal to go along with a vision for the library she had to somehow find a personal connection. However, the new principal is more of the director type. She has to approach him with a more to-the-point, fact driven strategy.

While we were discussing using leadership to move towards the completion of a vision, I brought up the idea of a learning organization. She had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. I figured that learning organizations are more common in the business world as opposed to a school environment. I explained the basics of learning organizations and asked her if that was something that happened within the school. She told me that within the small library staff she allows for a good amount of autonomy, but everything has to go through her before any major changes are made. As far as the district was concerned, there are channels that need to be gone through before anything can be done. For example, in order to make any major remodeling or rearranging of the library space she first has to talk to the building and grounds principal at the school, who then talks to the school principal, who then talks to the head of buildings and grounds at the district level who has to talk to the superintendent's office for approval. For any other changes, she has to talk to the principal, who then passes it on the district and superintendent.

Although I did not say it out loud, I thought that was kind of a waste of time for a lot of people. I did, however, ask what impact this top down approach has on her as a librarian. She told me that at times it can be very frustrating. For starters, the amount of time that it takes to get an idea from her library to the highest level and back can be months. She half joked that there are times that she submits an idea and by the time she gets a response she has forgotten why she made the request in the first place. I would think that in an environment that revolves around the collection and preservation of information, the idea of a learning organization would be extremely appealing. Perhaps it is a matter of taking a leadership role and communicating that vision to the board in a way that makes sense for all invested parties.