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“Will Work for Work” Facing Position Elimination

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Picture a startlingly beautiful April day. I am walking up to the library, enjoying the splendor of our new building and brimming with ideas and energy I have taken away from recently attending PLA in Boston. As I open the doors, I am unexpectedly greeted by my boss, the Community Services/Library Director. She walks me through the library rather than letting me go directly back to my desk. We exchange guarded pleasantries as she leads me to a conference room. There, the City Manager is waiting. I take a seat and look from face to face. I see tears welling in my boss's eyes. The City Manager speaks, but the only words I hear are, "... your position has been eliminated."

Mine was one of five middle-management positions targeted for elimination to save the city an estimated \$500,000. The unexpected loss of my position was not the only significant change coming for the library, others were looming as well: the rapidly-approaching departures of both the Community Services/Library Director and the Circulation Supervisor; library hours were scheduled to be reduced; a county-wide operating levy was on an upcoming ballot; and there was great uncertainty whether the replacement for the Director would have a library background.

Initially, it was difficult not to take the loss personally. This was my first professional library position. I had devoted the past 10 years to developing and refining my place in the organization. What about loyalty? What about dedication?

Surprisingly, after some reflection, I found I was more concerned for the future of the library than for myself. It was the bigger picture of the mission of the library, the well-being of staff, and the value to the community that were important. My priority became positioning the library to run effectively and efficiently with uncertain leadership and, in doing so, possibly earn my job back. I needed to get the library on solid footing before my scheduled departure at the end of June, only 85 days away, but how? It felt like it was me against the world.

Fortunately, just weeks into the process, the City hired a library consultant to evaluate library services and work on staff stabilization. Stabilizing the staff was designated a priority. This was where I embarked on a journey of both self-advocacy and library advocacy.

Countless conversations, e-mails, and impassioned pleas from the Library Board ensued, hoping to trigger a move in a positive direction for the library. As it ended up, though, the real work was up to the library consultant, the City Manager, and me. The three of us worked together very closely. There were more meetings, phone calls, and e-mails. At times we worked as a team, sometimes one-on-one. We all expected results quickly. The consultant and I worked ardently on a staffing plan. The consultant, alone, worked on her recommendations to city administration for the library's future. Progress was sometimes difficult. The City Manager was busy, the consultant was off-site with other obligations, and I still had my job to do. There were times when I felt the wheels were spinning, but we were getting nowhere.

Eleven weeks after being let go as Deputy Library Director, the announcement was made that I would fill the newly-created position of Library Manager. I was relieved, and so were the staff, the Board, and the community. We had come to an agreement about the position but there was still much work to do and I was able to get back to it. When I did, I found my work had been altered by the experience and shifted in a new direction. My next project was a detailed presentation for the City Council on future scenarios for the library. But that is another story ...



The process had certainly not been smooth, but challenging, frustrating, and rewarding all at the same time. What I came away with were valuable lessons learned, both personal and professional. I believe they were the keys to our success.

1. Don't take it personally

Position elimination in the public library world usually has to do with dollars and cents, not our abilities as library professionals. The sooner you can rid yourself of the voice that keeps nagging that it was something YOU did, the sooner you can start seeing the positive and begin to move ahead. Doubtless, being downsized can be one of life's most deflating experiences, but it can also be the beginning of something new.

2. Play well with others

Difficult as it may be, you need to show the willingness to cooperate and work with those very individuals who may have placed you in this difficult situation. You need to strengthen your relationships with them. Not only does it build their confidence in your capabilities, but it builds the foundation for a continued partnership that encourages lasting success.

3. Talk, talk, TALK!

Communicate. This is not the time to shut down and hold a grudge. You must work to create a stronger future, for the library and hopefully for yourself. It is incredibly important to provide information in terms relevant to decision-makers. Forget sweet anecdotes about happy children and story-times for now, and think data, numbers, and results. Seek and offer feedback. Be brave. When I went beyond my normal comfort level and said something difficult or challenging, I bolstered my spirits by thinking, "What can they do, fire me?!"

4. Turn crisis into opportunity by building your knowledge base

Look for possibilities, not roadblocks. Once you determine you can move on, look to things that elevate your potential, not those that keep you in a quagmire. I found that I had the latitude to stretch the boundaries of what I thought I was supposed to be doing as a library professional and really challenged myself to try new things. Where I had always said, "I'm a words person, not a numbers person," I now saw that it was in my best interest to learn how to craft a spreadsheet and learn more about budget law. I ran more calculations, projected more possibilities, and created more scenarios than I ever imagined I could. Those skills serve me well to this day.

5. Make the best out of the worst situation

Be a hero. If to no one else, be one for yourself. Maintain a positive attitude and a professional manner. Give your best and you will receive the best from others. Keep your sense of humor and learn to rely on your strengths and intuition. Don't let them see that you feel you have been let down, forge on with your head up.

6. Know that change is difficult but inevitable

A tired saying, but true. As you are going through your metamorphosis, remember that others might not be comfortable following along. Some people will never be able to adjust to change, and they will find their own means of making peace with the differences in you and your workplace.



7. Listen to wise voices

There are mentors all around us. They may be younger, in other professions, even standing in the line at the grocery store. Be open to what they have to say, and be open to accepting their support. You don't want to shut people out, thinking you can "do this on your own." This is the time to embrace the opportunity to learn from others. Listen.

8. Shine, Don't Whine

This is something else I follow to this day. Do not convey the image of the "poor library" or "poor me." Bring positive attention to the situation by demonstrating a "can do" attitude and highlighting successes. Decision-makers quickly tire of "we can't do it because we don't have ..." but are surprisingly attentive when an accomplishment is announced which might shine positive light on them as well as the library.

9. Always be working on "Plan B"

All the while you are doing this very honorable work for the future of the library, don't forget about yourself. Talk to colleagues. Put out feelers. Update your resume. Look for possible opportunities and apply for them. Take advantage of outplacement services. Be ready for change and pay attention to yourself.

As I read a draft of this to my husband he gently suggested it sounded too idealistic. He wondered how many people would actually have been willing to take a similar approach. I reminded him I wasn't writing this for just anyone, I was writing for "library people," many of whom have chosen this profession with great passion and dedication. And, while I recognize mine was a very unique situation, I believe the lessons I learned were extremely valuable and can be applied in many situations, not just troubling job loss.

It is possible to overcome disappointment and frustration with patience and determination. Once I was on the right course, I found that experience takes time. My process of learning did not end the day I regained my job—that continued well into the following months, as it still does today.

I was fortunate to have extremely supportive coworkers, incredibly wise mentors, loyal friends and family, and a caring spouse who helped me deal with a very complex and stressful time in my career.

To say that I had to grow both personally and professionally is an understatement. I learned to take responsibility for the library's future and my own and, I believe, we have both become stronger as a result. 🌿

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