

Libraries Taking a Lead

Peter A. Arthur-Smith

“Library strategy is about conceptual thinking; library operational-activities are about concrete thinking.”

At the April 22nd, 2021, ALA Monthly Webinar meeting led by President Julius Jefferson, we heard several incredible stories about how many US libraries had connected with their local communities to offset the effects of the pandemic. Then, in his *Making a Difference* article in the May 2021 American Libraries edition, he highlighted the \$7.2 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund recently passed by Congress that includes funding for library services related to devices and broadband internet for library patrons. The combination of both underscores what can be accomplished by community libraries, as well as what can potentially be achieved by community library leaders and their teams with this incredible new funding. It's a once in a generation opportunity not to be wasted.

To make the most of it, library leaders will need to pull their teams together as soon as possible to determine what local initiatives need to be pursued and what their funding needs are. They shouldn't be waiting for cookie-cutter programs to arrive or allotted funding to be provided, since that will likely mean they will be either underserved or underfunded in some way. They and their key teams need to proactively determine overall community strategic and operational library service funding requirements as soon as possible.

One of the biggest mistakes that so many library-leaders make when pursuing such needs, is mixing strategy and operational activities in a random manner. Often they try to accomplish both simultaneously, even though it's virtually impossible to undertake conceptual and analytical thinking at the same time. Too many, unfortunately, don't fully understand the nature of both functions, consequently miss the opportunity to optimally leverage both. Strategy is typically about *tomorrow*, whereas operational-thinking is much more about *today*.



Figure 1: Enlightened Strategic-Operational Alignment

By considering the author's graphic in figure 1: it better explains the distinct differences between both and how they impact each other – where a “strategic envelop” shapes the overall flow and operational activities occur within your purview. The shape of this “strategic envelop” is fashioned by the dynamics of your surrounding market and community environment. In other words, it modulates your operational activities. However,

without a clear idea of what that envelop looks like, your operational activities are likely to be inadequate and/or disjointed at best. This is probably why so many operational “plans” – using management vernacular – end up as a disappointment. Hence without an effective strategy-envelop new library funding opportunities are bound to be missed.

Using the example of a community library: If your library leadership team doesn’t know where it’s going or how it fits into or serves its local community, your staff could spend untold time spinning its wheels without a great deal to show for it. By not understanding local community reading tastes or expectations, library leaders will have limited ideas about what library areas to expand or shrink. They also won’t have clear ideas about what staff expertise is required to respond to local readers’ demands and tastes.

Even if they understand these differences, library leaders often don’t know how best to coordinate their strategic and operational activities. Many times they are so well versed in library technology and practices that they depend upon such factors to guide their library strategy, rather than see the bigger marketplace and societal picture to optimally orchestrate their library’s success. Technology and practices are only part of the story, whereas human behavior is a much bigger factor in predicting library success. We are sometimes overly impressed with people’s technical credentials more so than their human or team member capabilities.

Too often those same library leaders mix strategic and operational features in a haphazard way and therefore find their library is just treading water. Limited people-leadership capability and sensitivities can also put them at a performance disadvantage. So the question is: How do they best co-ordinate strategy and staff operational-activities to maximum library advantage?

This question pops-up in almost any organization’s life. It’s virtually impossible to orchestrate

Library Leader Tomorrow and Today Perspective

	TOMORROW STRATEGIC TIME-SPAN Envision & Position	TODAY OPERATIONAL TIME-SPAN Engage/ Collaborate/ Orchestrate
Major Library Leader/ Visionist	1-3 years	Current 1 year
Mid-size Library Leader/ Strategist	Up to 1 yr – Qtr by qtr	Current Qtr
Small Library Leader/ Team Leader	Next Qtr – 1 year	Current Month
Start-up Library Leader/ Team Leader	Next Qtr – 1 year	Current Month



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strategy and operational activities simultaneously without reducing clarity of thought or veering off in the wrong direction – usually due to some expedient thought or action. To that end, for library leaders and their immediate teams, and depending on the scale of their library operation, they should break their strategy-operational activities into appropriate time-spans. The adjacent Figure 2 shows four

Figure 2: Library Leader Tomorrow and Today Perspective

potential library leader roles and then depicts their required focus to balance strategic and operational activities. It breaks their focus down into *tomorrow* and *today* time-spans.

With this schematic, you can envisage the appropriate library leader focusing on the right degree of *tomorrow-time* on a regular basis to think through/envision their library journey and map-out/position the resources/activities that will be required during their next 1-3 years, 1 year or next quarter. These are vital, habitual disciplines required at each level. Wherever possible you should include your immediate team to gain their insights and overall buy-in, too. (NOTE: The exception would be if a large conceptual gulf exists between you and your team members, when it comes down to strategic issues. If so, a reasonable amount of time should be devoted to educating your team. If that doesn't produce the desired results, then outside strategic expertise should be considered until you can build the right strategic team combination.)

Once your strategic shape, intentions and resources are set, within the appropriate time-span window, then the corresponding operational activities can be formulated to fit within your strategic envelop. Now you and your library team are much better equipped to pursue and execute your journey, its milestones and operational initiatives...they can be labeled A, B, C, D etc. and executed accordingly. We recommend that these initiatives are pursued by team "pairs."

Pairs are the optimal team size for making things happen – don't rely so much on individuals to deliver, since their approach could be too shallow. Also, you should aim to restrict the number of initiatives that you focus on at any one time – preferably *three*. (NOTE: As much as is possible, "pair members" should be complementary to each other in personality and skill terms; since, when people are too much alike, they're usually not particularly creative.)

Initially, this sounds like a real challenge. But, in the same way that you learned how to drive a car, balancing between the brake and the accelerator, you discovered an optimum approach for holding your driving speed over a reasonable period of time. Strategy and operational-activities are much the same, except that instead of using your feet you will be using your head. Over time, as with learning to drive, your approach to optimizing strategy and operational-activities will become fairly automatic and team members will be better able to respond to your approach.

And so, with our opening premise about library outreach activities during the pandemic and

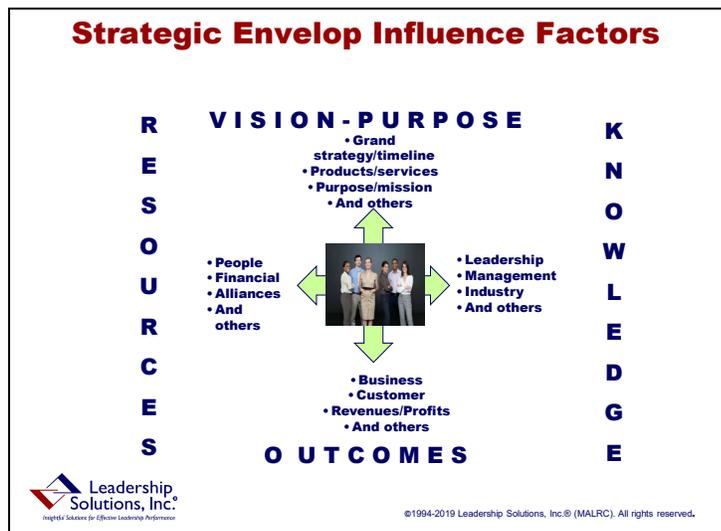


Figure 3: Strategic Envelop Influence Factors

the Emergency Connectivity Funding about to be unleashed, it's time for library leaders and their teams to take full advantage of the opportunity. However, instead of being reactive to funding possibilities, they need to be proactive by determining the shape of their "strategic envelop" through four dimensions – see Figure 3. This will clarify what near-term operational activities will be necessary – and in what sequence – to realize their community library vision.

There are four key strategic dimensions that influence your Strategic Envelop: Your compelling

Vision-Purpose, required *Knowledge* areas, necessary *Resources* and conducive *Outcomes* – again see Figure 3. Each one is clearly dependent on the other three, consequently where one is not at an optimal level it impacts your overall result. You and your team are expected to figure out your library requirements for each component, so that you can establish your optimal "strategic envelop."

By drawing upon this strategic framework, you can pull your key team together – aim to make the group no more than seven, including yourself. Find a quiet space with appropriate flip-charts, whiteboards or video-projection-screens where some concentrated thought can be applied to this vital moment. Now you are all ready to answer some important questions, such as:

» **Vision-Purpose**

- *What is our overall strategy timeline – 3 yrs, 1 yr, 1 qtr – relative to our scale of operation?*
- *What sort of library products/services should we be offering to our local community?*
- *What is our library purpose/mission relative to our scale of operation?*
- *What will be the future library needs of our community?*

» **Knowledge**

- *What leadership-management know-how will we require to effectively orchestrate community needs?*
- *What library expertise will our team and staff require to meet current and future needs?*
- *What library and community trends do we foresee in order to remain relevant?*
- *What societal trends do we envisage that need to be understood?*

» **Resources**

- *What people and financial resources do we have and need to fulfill our library vision?*
- *What facilities do we have and need to fulfill our library vision?*
- *What local and national alliances will we require to fulfill our purpose and vision?*

- *What volunteer resources should we attract to help accomplish our vision?*

» **Outcomes**

- *What outcomes will our community expect to satisfy its needs?*

- *What will be the performance expectations of those who sponsor our library?*

- *What outcomes will be expected by our staff and volunteers to encourage their full participation?*

- *What outcomes will our leadership team expect to inspire its full attention?*

(NOTE: You are welcome to include your own questions within these suggestions.)

Once you and your team have clarified your thoughts on each question – where key notes have been recorded on each one, through either you as leader or a nominated team member – then as a team you should *rate* how well your library meets these requirements. This can be as simple as: *Above community expectations*, *Meets community expectations*, or *Below community expectations*. The key is to challenge yourselves to be as brutally objective as possible – too many *Above community expectations* could mean that your team’s standards are inadequate for orchestrating an outstanding community library.

As all these thoughts synergize, you and your team will now have an interesting picture of your strategic envelop and the likely journey you should pursue to provide an outstanding community library service. In this state of mind, you and your team should designate *critical* areas for attention, *important* ones and *nice-to-do* ones. If you have an overwhelming number of critical ones, then it’s likely you haven’t been discerning enough – unless your library is in desperate shape – and you should review your designations once more.

Starting with the critical areas; you should return to the “pairing” principle once more. Each pair can volunteer to pursue a critical area to start with – eventually they can work through the entire listing over time – on the basis of WHAT, HOW, WHO, WHEN and WHERE (to go for other input/help). Such working formats are essential to clarify their approach, to gain your own and team “buy-in,” and propel them forward.

Your team-pairs should meet regularly to review progress and “celebrate” successes in a prudent but meaningful way. Such a celebration component is key to sustaining interest and momentum. Now you and they will begin to experience their library flourishing to a new level. Your team will be ready to request and absorb vital new funding and take the “bull by the horns” pursuing their well thought out strategic initiatives; rather than wait to be told what to do. That is the ultimate prize of leadership.

Peter A. Arthur-Smith (peter@ileadershipsolutions.com) is the Founding Principal of Leadership Solutions, Inc®, New York, which offers groundbreaking organizational tools and practices that can position executives to become Enlightened Leaders.

Published: November 2021