

# Relationships: The heart of a community-led library

By Linda Woodcock.

John Pateman, Chief Librarian, Thunder Bay Public Library Services has been a driving force in the movement to make public libraries more socially inclusive and more responsive to the needs of their communities. Research that Mr. Pateman carried out in Britain was used to inspire and inform the Working Together Project here in Canada. This project involved four Canadian urban libraries in a four-year study to identify and investigate systemic barriers to library use.

His presentation at the 2014 BC Library Conference was centered on the need to improve our ability to build relationships. Relationships, says Mr. Pateman, are the heart of a needs-based and community-led public library. Following a needs-based philosophy, libraries must actively engage all sections of the community and transform from being providers of services to agents of social change. Currently libraries spend 80% of their resources to serve the 21% of the population who are active library users and Pateman advocates for libraries to invert this so as to spend the majority of our resources engaging the non-users of the library.

In pursuing this goal at the Thunder Bay Public Library, Pateman oversaw a strategic planning exercise that included the establishment of a community action panel. This advisory panel was open to all and was involved in the development of the plan from design to delivery. The TBPL service plan for 2013-2016 adopted five new directions:

- Encourage lifelong learning,
- Support our local economy,
- Embrace change & innovation
- Promote diversity & social inclusion
- Foster community well-being & personal growth

The five strategic directions were used as a service sieve. If an opportunity passes through more than one sieve then it was placed higher on the priority list. This approach allowed the library to say no to certain opportunities with a good reason to support that decision.

An organizational systems review followed in order to identify and lower barriers. They then examined their

internal policies and structures with a view to whether they permitted the achievement of these new directions. Pateman discussed the interplay between organizational culture and the introduction of new strategies, structures and systems. Strategic change cannot be achieved unless the organizational culture changes, unless the attitudes, behaviours and values underlying "the way we do things around here" are changed. To address this TBPL adopted a team-based staffing model that provided autonomy for staff teams and matched staff strengths with the new strategic directions. Staff across the entire organization needed to be able to participate in relationship building, to be guides on the side, not sages on the stage.

Pateman is keenly interested in the library as an agent of equality and asks the question: do libraries make people feel more equal or are people who feel more equal more likely to be library users? A number of studies lend support to the idea that libraries might be agents of change with respect to furthering equality. One such study by Wilkinson & Pickett attempted to identify societies with the greatest equality and show that they were more successful than those with greater inequality. If one takes the countries that scored highest and looks at their library usage it turns out they also had very high rates of library use. Pateman emphasizes that if libraries are contributing to equality then the challenge is to identify what that contribution is and measure it. If, as some studies suggest, frequent readers are more likely to be satisfied with life, then libraries have a role to play in improving quality of life. Defining that role must be done by identifying needs through relationship building and community development.

Further reading:

[Thunder Bay Public Library Strategic Plan 2013-2016 \(PDF\)](#)

Pateman, John and Williment, Ken. *Developing Community-Led Public Libraries : Evidence from the UK and Canada.* Burlington : Ashgate, 2013.

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