The Sweet Spot

Four Corner Case

The situation:

Four Corners is a community in transition. Previously, most families were solidly middle class. Now the community is more diverse and divided. Some very wealthy residents are employed at the new tech firms and a growing number of immigrants from Latin America and Vietnam work in a shrinking number of factories or in service jobs. There is a growing sense of frustration about the changes people see in the community, such as an increased demand on public services and uneven opportunities in employment and education. At the same time people realize they can’t turn the clock back.

Many of the new immigrant residents live on the east side and rely heavily upon public library computers. These residents also require a lot of help from library staff, as few have much experience with computers. Few staff members speak Spanish or Vietnamese, so it can be a challenge to support these residents.

The west side of town is considerably more affluent, and where most of the library’s volunteers and board members live. Thanks in part to fundraising efforts run by the board, the library is in a position to consider expanding services.

You are part of the public library’s senior leadership team. The board has indicated their desire to see a major review of library programs and services in light of the changing community.

The questions:
1. What’s at issue here? What’s really going on?

2. How do the Intentionality Tests apply here?

3. What would you do in this situation? What would you be thinking about?
The 3A’s of Public Life

East Rivington Public Library Case

The situation:

As part of a planning effort one year ago, the library conducted three town hall meetings. All three meetings were very well attended and the conversation with community members surfaced both areas of satisfaction and areas where there appear to be some significant problems.

The biggest problem identified was that community members were finding out about library programs after they had already happened. The library director charged a task force with figuring out what has been going wrong with communications about public programs. On this task force are Lisa, the chair (head of adult services), Jean (head of children’s services), Peter (assistant to the director and editor of the library newsletter) and Lindsay (a reference librarian).

The task force has been meeting every week for five months. Within the first month, the group identified the newsletter mailing schedule as the central issue and tasked Peter with changing the schedule for article and information submission.

Last week, a very upset community member visited the director’s office to complain that he had missed a program on the new Affordable Care Act. The director apologized profusely and promised to provide him with all the handouts from the program. The community member left, muttering that he was not the only unhappy person in town. The director then called the entire task force into his office and demanded to know what they had been doing all this time and why the schedule of public programs was still not reaching community members in a timely way.

Lisa, Jean and Lindsay pointed to Peter as the bottleneck in changing the newsletter process. Peter complained that he had been simultaneously given a big assignment to create a database of the contact information for the Friends of the Library and had not been able to get to the revisions of the processes for the newsletter. The director has once again asked that this be a priority and has asked all four task members to work together to get this done.

The questions:

1. What is at issue in this situation? What is really going on here?
2. What is the most important thing to do in this situation? Who should be doing those things?
3. How do the Intentionality Tests apply here?
Public Knowledge

Waterville Case

The situation:

The Waterville Public Library grew in size and prominence in the good economic times of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In that time, the library expanded its building, creating a special computer and workshop space for adults. Coupled with the new wing, and under the banner of “Your Community Hub,” the library launched a series of popular adult programs and quickly became known regionally for these efforts.

In the last 10 years costs have soared and revenue has declined, while the library continued to expand its programs of all types. The once-growing suburb is changing. Children who once attended after-school programming are young adults and moving out. Enrollment in adult programs is also declining. What’s more, after two successive levy defeats the library is facing the need to make dramatic cuts.

One board member provided pro-bono marketing support and his firm has advocated pushing the slogan “Still Your Community Hub,” even as the library faces cutbacks in staff positions and in the number of weekend hours it is open.

The library clearly has important decisions to make about its relationship with the community and the programs and services it will offer. You are part of a staff team that has been tasked with preparing the background documents for an upcoming board retreat on the future of the library.

The questions:

1. What’s at issue here? What’s really going on?

2. How do the Intentionality Tests apply here?

3. What would you do in this situation? What would you be thinking about?