# Creating an Effective New Employee Orientation Program

## Karen Wallace

The hiring process can be stressful for both employee and employer. It typically requires both parties to consider their needs and how to present themselves most favorably. The process can be time-consuming and emotional. So, when a job offer has been accepted, it may seem like it's time to breathe a sigh of relief and kick back. To some extent it is. However, if employers become overly relaxed about the next stage of the process—orientation—they may find the new hire's performance to be subpar or they may prematurely return to square one: advertising for a new employee. Designing an effective orientation program helps protect the resources invested during the hiring process and can pay dividends for years to come. This article outlines what orientation is and why it is important and identifies essential factors to consider when creating or improving an orientation program.

## Orientation

### Orientation Is about the Organization

Orientation accompanies training, but the two are not identical. It has frequently been noted that training emphasizes the specific details (what and how), while orientation focuses on the big picture (why). All employees should understand certain fundamentals of their organization: what it is trying to do, why it is doing that, and how the particular employee contributes to these efforts. Orientation conveys these messages, providing a framework that shows the new employee where he or she fits into the organization and its aims. As one corporate training services manager succinctly expresses, "NEO [New employee orientation] should be about who we are, how new hires fit in, and why they're important."[1]

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### It Is Also about the New Employee

As noted above, orientation should express the importance of the new employee's role to achieving the organization's mission. However, the most successful orientations will also be designed with an awareness of the new employee's mindset. It's typically exciting but stressful to start a new job. It can be overwhelming. In fact, new employees can feel disoriented: they may not know basics like where to park or get office supplies; they are learning colleagues' names, responsibilities, and personalities; they are discovering what is expected of them. Attending to personal and social needs—helping the new employee feel welcomed and comfortable, get his or her bearings, and become part of the team—is a critical aspect of orientation and among the most important elements of the first few days. In contrast, minimizing or skipping orientation leaves new employees unnecessarily confused and sends the message they are not important.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to hear horror stories about inadequate orientations—or worse. One new employee observed, "My welcome wagon was a frazzled administrative assistant who did not have time for a proper orientation"; elsewhere, another new employee worked all day without being given a lunch break.[2] Such experiences are not uncommon in the business world, nor are they rare in libraries. Noting that the problem is particularly acute for professional librarians, Katherine Mossman observes, "The irony is that librarians often train paraprofessionals better than they train each other."[3] Michael Schott's 2006 *Library Journal* article lampooning the inadequacies of library orientation and the response to the article further suggest that libraries could improve new employee orientation (see figure 1).[4]

### Orientation Is a Process

The first day is clearly an important part of orientation. However, as has been widely recognized, orientation is not just a first-day or a single event, but a process. The best orientations are designed as an extension of the recruitment, selection and hiring processes. In many cases, this is the stage at which the library starts to make an impression on the person who eventually becomes its new employee.

**Figure 1.** What better way to welcome someone to the library than with a mountain of manuals and paperwork? That must be why this new librarian looks so enthused. (Photo by Karen Wallace, used with permission.)



Even when individuals already have formed an impression of the library—from a user's point of view, for instance—the hiring process can help solidify or alter that preliminary impression.

The heightened emotional experience of starting a new job often means that the employee is greatly interested and eager to learn and prove himself or herself. This helps make the early days a particularly vital period to begin developing an outstanding employee. There is no universally accepted length for orientation. As a new employee moves farther away from the starting date, experience and knowledge grow and orientation needs begin fading. However, it is important to avoid just setting the employee adrift. At minimum, the manager and other key personnel need to continue checking in to see how the new hire is doing, answer questions he or she may have, and make sure expectations remain clear. Additional formal orientation activities may also be scheduled.

An extended period of orientation and training can risk making the new employee feel relegated to the status of perpetual newbie. To help avoid this perception, orientation can be cast as part of the library's career-long commitment to the employee's continued growth. While some elements of the orientation program will be inviolable, others may be tailored to the new employee's needs. Giving the new employee the chance to shape the plan helps present orientation as a cooperative endeavor, rather than a paternalistic one. For instance, the supervisor can allow the new hire a voice in determining the optimal timing or methods of presenting information. The manager strengthens

this message by striking an appropriate balance between a smothering or a sink-or-swim approach. In '80s song lingo, the manager must "Hold on loosely, but don't let go."

With that caveat understood, it is highly likely that the new hire will, in some ways, remain a novice (to the particular library, if not to libraries as a whole) throughout the entire first year. Many libraries experience distinctive seasonal cycles, such as summer reading club, the start of a new semester, or the end of the fiscal year. The demands of these periods may be routine to long-standing employees but will still be novel to someone hired within the year. Remaining cognizant of these events can help the supervisor maintain that necessary close-but-loose contact as the initial year progresses. Employee recognition company Michael C. Fina tries to accomplish this through a new employee orientation program that includes thirteen points of contact (touch-points) starting with day one and continuing through the one-year anniversary date.[5]

## Benefits

The literature abounds with evidence of the benefits of a well-designed and implemented orientation program.[6] Frequently cited advantages include:

- increasing commitment to the organization and reducing turnover, which saves money (and frustration) in the long run;
- clarifying expectations and providing reliable information;
- shortening the learning curve, increasing productivity, and decreasing mistakes;
- helping the new employee feel like a valued team member in which the library has an investment;
- increasing employee confidence and relieving anxiety; and
- contributing to a positive relationship and good communication between the new employee, the supervisor and other close coworkers.

This impressive list of benefits raises the question as to why all libraries do not invest in advanced orientation programs. A perceived shortage of time surely contributes greatly. Most libraries face many competing priorities, which often encourage resources to be directed toward the most immediate needs. Orientation programs are primarily immediate needs at a time when there is at least one staff vacancy. During this period, it is not uncommon for the supervisor of the open position to maintain regular work duties, spend extra time recruiting and interviewing, and help pick up slack from the open position. These demands make it difficult to invest in orientation design or redesign at the time of need. However, since orientation is a recurring need, a job opening can provide an opportunity at least to begin laying the foundation for a program. The program

in place can then be enhanced after the employee is on board, using that person's insights to make improvements. Another option is to select a time to work on an orientation design or redesign independent of a position opening or recent hire. Although resources would be invested without knowing exactly when the program will next be needed, there would also be an assurance that the day will arrive—and occur repeatedly.

The uniqueness of the two key elements of orientation—the new employee(s) and the organization—means there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to planning or revising an orientation program. However, there are at least six common issues, overlapping to some extent, to consider in program design. These are discussed below.

## Goals

Desired ends must be defined in order to determine whether they are achieved. Although the goal-setting step is critical in the formulation and evaluation of orientation programs, this step is often skipped. Ensuring that the orientation achieves one or more of the desired aforementioned benefits could comprise reasonable program goals. Sample goals include:

- *Affirming the employee's decision to accept the job*. The new hire should feel that he or she did in fact make a good decision to come work for the library. A good orientation can help reinforce the decision employees make every day to stay at that job.
- *Communicating expectations*. New employees can contribute more quickly and effectively when they know the desired result. Conversely, in the absence of clearly communicated expectations, new employees will make assumptions that may prove inaccurate or seek information from sources that may prove unreliable. Written work expectations can provide a useful reference; these should also be discussed to ensure both parties share a common understanding.
- *Encouraging the new employee to start thinking in "us" terms as soon as possible*. The more quickly the new hire feels comfortable in the workplace and aligned with the library's mission, the deeper that person's commitment and contributions are likely to be.

Cooke suggests several questions senior managers, supervisors and employees can answer to yield data helpful in developing program goals, and Barbazette offers a checklist of thirty-two possible knowledge, skill, and attitude objectives of orientation.[7]

## Content

Some of the essentials new employees require are universal. The location of the bathrooms may be the most basic example of this kind of information. Because of these common needs, borrowing from others can save time and ensure that fundamental information is not inadvertently skipped. A number of checklists and other orientation resources for new library employees have been published; additional materials are available online, especially from academic libraries.[8]

Libraries of all types may also find adaptable information in more detailed descriptions of three academic libraries' experiences implementing or refining orientation programs: North Carolina State University Libraries, Kansas State University Libraries, and Indiana State University Libraries.[9] Similarly, libraries of all types might find value in the Ohio Library Council's online orientation program for new public library employees, which includes background information, activities, and supervisor tips.[10] Libraries with significant legal collections could benefit from Yessin's overview of law libraries and legal materials; additionally, libraries with other unique collections may find Yessin's article sparks some ideas about introducing new employees to that collection.[11]

The library's newest hires constitute a key resource for identifying institution-specific content. One company asked employees who had started within six months what they wished they'd known on their first day; this led to the creation of several valuable resources: a glossary of technical terms and jargon, an organization chart with photos, and an FAQ list.[12] Seeking input from others in the work unit and even key customers can also suggest pertinent content. The Indiana State University Libraries surveyed all current employees when revising its orientation program; among other results, this informed their creation of a welcome packet that includes a glossary of library terms and abbreviations, library staff handbook, library calendar, staff phone list, and more.[13]

What is important to a manager and important to a new employee can differ. As with all effective communication, the intended audience needs to be considered as well as the message. Trying to view the experience of starting at the library from the vantage point of the new hire can make orientation more relevant and memorable. Barbazette suggests a list of questions new employees typically have.[14]

In addition, to the extent possible, orientation should be customized to the individual employee's experiences and needs. As noted, much time, money, and effort has typically already been invested in a person by the start date. The new employee was not randomly selected as an interchangeable part; nor should orientation suggest the person is simply a cog. Considerations in tailoring the orientation may include the individual's background (preexisting knowledge, skills, and experiences); the preferred learning and teaching styles of both the new employee and those providing orientation; and the work demands of the particular job, department, and time of year. These factors may be addressed in part by providing the new employee formative input in the orientation schedule. For instance, when discussing initial job expectations, the supervisor and new employee may talk

candidly about the training needed to accomplish these tasks and jointly create a learning plan.

## Organizational Culture

While immersed in a particular environment, certain ways of doing things seem completely natural. However, what seems obvious to a current employee may be very exotic to the new hire. Consider this experience: When bestselling author Lisa Scottoline started her career, she was living off her credit cards. She diverted her daughter's attention from any expense that could not be funded with plastic. At the time, this included the omnipresent McDonald's, as attractive a siren as any to a young child. When Scottoline began earning a living as an author, she allowed her daughter to choose any restaurant she wanted for a celebratory meal. Deprived of the golden arches all her life, her daughter happily selected McDonald's. Arriving there, Scottoline saw how certain things she took for granted were confusing to the novice fast-food consumer. "Where," asked her daughter, "is the menu?" Scottoline pointed to the large board above the counter and explained that it was the menu. "Oh," said her daughter. "But where are the appetizers?"[15]

Explicitly addressing those seemingly obvious matters which may not be so apparent to a newcomer can reduce mistakes and help the new employee feel more comfortable. By thoughtfully attending to organizational socialization, employees become familiar not only with their jobs but also with institutional values, practices, taboos, and other matters of organizational culture, both spoken and unspoken. For example, when and where do most employees eat lunch? Is there an unwritten dress code? If you are with someone in your office and the phone rings are you expected to answer it or let it go to voicemail? Do people address colleagues, supervisors, and customers by first names or by title and last name? A significant challenge rests in the fact that these practices may be deeply ingrained and difficult to identify. The University of Saskatchewan Library used the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument to define its culture.[16] However, organizational culture can also be assessed less formally, through guided observation, considering select issues, and answering certain questions.[17] New hires who understand a library's culture are more likely to succeed (see figure 2).

Although understanding the library's culture may be one of the more difficult lessons for a new librarian to learn, libraries do not often include this topic in orientation. Organizations may trust that new employees will eventually absorb the institutional culture as time passes. However, failing to address these issues can lead to awkward situations—or worse. Consider this law student's first day at a summer internship. Working diligently with her office door closed, she noticed it was after 5 p.m. She found that everyone else had already gone home, and she was locked in the office. She called the sheriff to let her out. The next day a coworker revealed that when she started in the same office, she had also been locked in and had crawled through a very small window to get out of the office.[18] Not only can bad things happen to new employees, they can happen without the organization learning from them!

The orientation itself should also reflect organizational values and conform with everyday practice. Ideally, other employees will model stated organizational values, reinforcing the lesson. In contrast, a "Do as I say, not as I do" orientation is unsurprisingly ineffective. If, for instance, a supervisor emphasizes the library's attentiveness to patrons and the new hire sees work behaviors that clearly aren't customer-focused, that undercuts the supervisor's credibility and sends mixed messages.

## Timing, Pacing, and Sequencing

The first few days at a new job deeply influence the employee's motivation and success. Whether planned or not, orientation begins right away. Building on preexisting perceptions about the library, the new hire immediately starts absorbing information about how things work and what's important. If left to fend for him- or herself, it is less likely these perceptions (buoyed by assumptions) will be fully informed and accurate. Moreover, initial perceptions can be

**Figure 2.** As with these twins, two libraries can strongly resemble each other at a glance but reveal significant differences upon closer inspection. Explicitly teaching new employees about matters of organizational culture can enhance productivity, relieve stress, and avoid awkward situations. (Photo by Karen Wallace, used with permission.)

difficult to change. Thus, an orientation of the library's design will preferably begin without delay.

The library must strike a careful balance between providing too little information and overwhelming the new hire with too much data, which can leave the person "more confused and ill at ease than assured and relaxed."[19] The common syndrome of providing excessive information up front has been called "information dump," "the fire hose approach," and "borientation."[20] One consulting group found that information retention can be as low as 15 percent on the first day.[21] One of the best ways to address this is by remembering that orientation is a process and designing it as such.

## Pre-Hire

Information conveyed in the job advertisement and other recruitment materials, as well as during the interview, can lay the groundwork for a solid orientation. During the hiring process the new employee begins to form an impression of the library as institution and forge relationships with colleagues. The hiring process also constitutes the perfect time to introduce organizational vision, mission, values, and other key information. Not only can this help ensure the right candidate is hired, it also aids the employee's understanding and retention when the information is presented post-hire, because the person will not be hearing it for the first time. Hiring interactions also provide a critical chance to begin to formulate realistic expectations. Researchers have noted that when employees' expectations don't match reality, it can lead to higher turnover or lower job satisfaction, a result Oud also found among academic librarians.[22]

## Post-Hire, Before the First Day

Providing the new employee with information prior to the start date can help relieve anxiety and capitalize on natural excitement. Again, it is important to consider the situation from the new employee's perspective, providing information a new hire will find relevant and helpful. Many new employees are concerned with personal, concrete details, like what to wear on the first day of work. Other common areas of concerns include parking, office location, supplies, equipment, phones, computers, food, and salutations.

There are many ways to reinforce positive feelings about the new job and begin setting expectations during this period. Ideas include:

- sending popcorn and a welcome video for the new employee to watch at home;
- mailing a personalized welcome card signed by everyone in the department; and
- making at least one personal telephone call from the manager to the new hire, including phoning the day before the start date to address any last-minute questions the new hire may have.[23]

As someone who once spent the day before starting a new job sitting in the living room, watching a record snowfall, and realizing I knew neither how to verify whether the library would be open the next day nor how to enter the building before it opened to the public, I particularly applaud the suggestion of a last-minute phone call. Additionally, starting or completing paperwork during this time can allow the employee to work on this necessary, but tedious, task in the comfort of home, saving time on the first day for more engaging work.

Often, a new job is also a transition for the employee's immediate family. Providing the new hire work contact (phone number, e-mail address) and scheduling information ahead of time allows the person to share that information with family or update emergency contact forms filed at children's schools, a significant other's workplace, and so forth. Additional outreach includes sending a welcome note to the family; providing family members with library-logoed items, such as mugs, T-shirts, canvas bags, pencils (this can be a great use of leftover program materials); or sending flowers to the spouse on the first day.[24]

This is also the time to prepare the current workplace for the new employee. This includes properly outfitting the workstation, adding the employee's name to directories and distribution and routing lists, establishing IT rights, and the like. Consider the difference in message sent by the following actual first-day experiences: At an undisclosed workplace, an employee is led to a sealed box, told it contains his cubicle, and instructed to assemble it. At the University of Nebraska's Schmid Law Library, a luckier employee is taken to a clean office, with irrelevant files removed, and a small plant or bouquet of flowers as a welcome.[25] Ensuring standard office supplies are already at the desk is another gracious touch. As Belaiche suggests, these can even be packaged in a gift basket, providing a relatively inexpensive hint of festivity and allowing the new hire to set up (rather than rearrange) the desk to his or her liking.[26]

Before the new employee begins, management should prepare current library staff, letting them know not only the person's name and other basic profile information but also the start date, job role, and responsibilities. This can help prevent misunderstandings and other conflicts. Suggesting ways current employees can help the new hire adjust can be helpful as well as emphasizing teamwork. Depending on the situation, it may also make sense to alert key customers or other constituents to the new hire's arrival.

## After Starting

As noted, the first day at a new job is memorable and critical to establishing a tone for the employment. A limited amount of information can be successfully presented in just one day. Determining the point at which particular information should be presented can be difficult. One technique is to rephrase the common question "What information does a new employee need?" to either "What would it take for a

new employee to be more effective immediately?" or "What does this new employee need to proceed satisfactorily through this first week?"[27] As Ezzell notes, this approach involves separating the "nice to know" from the "need to know" and focusing on the latter.[28] Need may be driven by a variety of concerns, including legal requirements, essential job functions, time of the year, or safety issues. If the new employee begins immediately after the annual report has been submitted, for example, the supervisor may wait to discuss in detail the new hire's contributions to that effort. However, if part of the preparation of that report requires completing ongoing tasks, such as gathering statistics or success stories, this information will have to be provided relatively soon after the start date. In addition to staggering the dissemination of information, understanding and retention improve when employees receive time to absorb what has been presented.

A related approach is to "teach access more than content."[29] This involves letting the employee know where to go with questions and what information resources are available, a process very familiar to librarians. Sites for implementation models include the Kansas State University libraries, which provide new employees a resource book about the libraries intended to serve as a reference beyond orientation, and the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law Library, which maintains an intranet offering easy access to a variety of documents addressing library policies, development opportunities, timesheets and paychecks, and other matters of concern to employees (see figure 3).[30]

Incorporating real and interesting work as soon as possible also helps retain employee interest, allows the new employee to make a genuine contribution (and enjoy the accompanying satisfaction), and encourages active learning. Barbazette suggests a variety of meaningful first-day assignments.[31]

## Responsibilities and Methods

A well-designed orientation program requires top administrative support to demonstrate its importance and ensure that it emphasizes strategic objectives. In addition, the direct supervisor must be heavily involved with the establishment and provision of orientation. The organizational relationship of the supervisor and new employee gives each party a rational, vested interest in the other. The supervisor wants the hiring process to have succeeded and the employee to perform well; the new employee has a great interest in understanding what is important to the person who completes the performance review and with whom she or he will regularly interact. A busy supervisor may be tempted to limit his or her time providing orientation, but should remember the resources expended at this stage protect the great amount of time already spent in recruitment. By giving an orientation short shrift, transmitting information on the fly, the manager conveys a message of self-importance and the new employee's lack of value.

While the direct supervisor should not delegate the entire orientation, neither should he or she attempt to conduct it all alone. Involving others in the orientation presents an opportunity for relationships to develop, takes advantage of different individuals' areas of expertise, and shares the work load. It also helps provide breaks in the new employee's day and offers varied memory cues for the new employee for different topics. When asking people to assist with orientation, it is useful to consider attitude. If possible, avoid giving the department Eeyore substantial orientation responsibilities. Moreover, it can be useful to provide training in the provision of orientation to supervisors and others with this responsibility. For instance, the Cleveland Clinic Foundation assists managers in orientation planning and provision through a training session, including a role-play exercise that viscerally underscores the importance of orientation.[32]

Formally or informally matching a nonsupervisor mentor, buddy, or orientation guide with the new employee can also prove beneficial. Good matches can encourage new employee questions, especially those it might be awkward to ask a manager; provide opportunities for socialization; improve the understanding of the organizational culture, politics, and personalities; clarify work responsibilities; and assist in networking and research and publication activities. Orientation can utilize a wide variety of methods. Selecting multiple means of presenting information can increase effectiveness by addressing differences in learning styles. Consideration of adult learning principles can also enhance information retention. For example, many organizations use orientation checklists to ensure all necessary information is communicated. The adult learning principle

**Figure 3.** New employees at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law Library can easily find the organization chart, key policies, and more via the staff intranet.
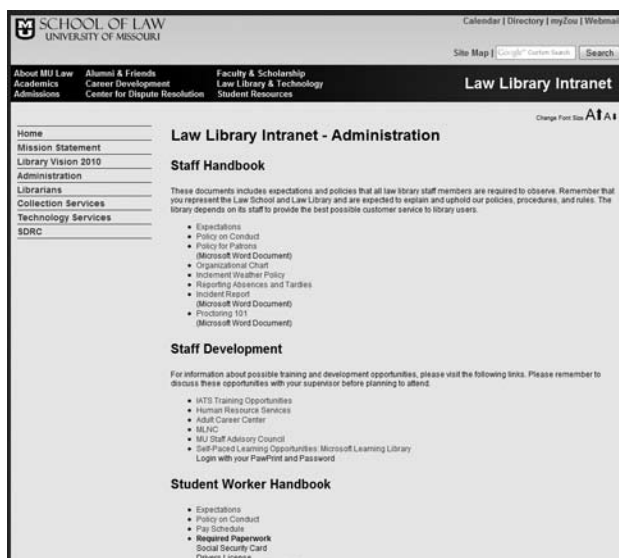
of self-directedness can easily be accommodated through the simple procedure of giving the new hire the responsibility of adding questions to the checklist and tracking its completion, rather than having the supervisor principally responsible for completing the list. Additional orientation methods may include:

- one-on-one conversations;
- group meetings;
- self-guided exercises or activities;
- scavenger hunts;
- games and group activities;
- video presentations (for example, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County [N.C.] provides a welcome from the director on YouTube[33]);
- online tutorials;
- reading materials;
- workbooks or quizzes;
- in-person or audiovisual tours;
- guest speakers;
- new employee interviews of other key coworkers; and
- welcome celebrations, such as a lunch or break with staff.

As Cadwell notes, most employers host a celebration when people leave, but many neglect to hold one when an employee joins the organization, missing a great opportunity to demonstrate excitement and begin building relationships.[34]

Welcome gifts can also convey important information about the organization itself as well as sending the message that the new employee is valued. For example, new employees at the Des Plaines (Ill.) Public Library receive a library mug; a candy bar wrapped in a paper stating the library's mission, vision, and key belief statements; and some office supplies (see figure 4). An accompanying note explains the significance of each part of the gift:

> We're glad to have you on staff at the Des Plaines Public Library! Please enjoy these gifts that represent our wishes for you as a member of our team:
>
> **Cup:** Keep it filled with nourishing things.
> **Candy bar:** Digest our mission, vision, and key beliefs.
> **Eraser:** We are a learning organization, and we learn from our mistakes.
> **Pen and Post-It notes:** Give and receive feedback.
> **Highlighter:** Remember, your good service may be the highlight of someone's day.
> **Calculator:** We count on you.[35]

## Evaluation/Feedback

To ensure the orientation accomplishes its objectives, the library will want to assess the program regularly. Types of evaluation include:

**Figure 4.** New employees at the Des Plaines Public Library receive a gift that communicates several key library values as well as extending a welcome. (Photo by Karen Wallace, used with permission.)



- *An overall self-assessment.* This occurs when administrators and others involved with orientation efforts note what they have been doing and consider what changes they might want to make. This can be particularly useful when first creating a formal program or overhauling a long-standing program. Barbazette, Cadwell, and Davis offer samples of this kind of assessment.[36]
- *Assessments (or reality checks) with the individual.* During the orientation and training processes, the manager will want to have frequent, low-key check-ins with the new employee to help ensure the information presented has accurately been absorbed. Options for accomplishing this include:
  - regularly inviting questions;
  - using open-ended questions like asking the new employee to describe covered content in his or her own words rather than relying solely on yes/no questions, like "is this clear?";
  - using retention checklists, such as those suggested by Barbazette;[37]
  - asking the new employee to provide oral or written reflection on different facets of the orientation experience;

- giving a post-test on information covered in orientation;
- regularly observing the employee to assess understanding and application of orientation and training concepts; and
- providing regular feedback and encouragement, which can also improve employee performance, continuing to clarify expectations and defusing any potential problems before they become serious. (This period can also provide a good opportunity to gather evaluative data on the library itself. Bromberg suggests ten questions to ask new employees shortly after they begin working to see the library through fresh eyes.[38])
- *Individual assessments of the program.* After completing the orientation, libraries can ask the new employees to assess the experience. These results can be individually reviewed and compiled to obtain broader data indicating areas that might need to be altered. Depending on the orientation program, it could be useful to give this assessment twice: once upon completion of the initial wave of orientation activities, when any identified problems for the individual new employee can still be corrected relatively easily, and once after the employee is fairly well established, such as on the first anniversary. Obtaining input from other key participants, such as supervisors and mentors, can also provide useful data. Arthur, Cadwell, and Davis offer samples of these kinds of assessments.[39]

Of course, gathering the evaluative data can only be the first step. The library needs to review that information and adapt the program as suitable. Davis suggests practical ways to analyze and use the evaluative data to improve the orientation program.[40]

## Conclusion

Providing a well-developed orientation protects the investments of the hiring process, eases new employees' anxieties, and enhances their work. The orientation process communicates key information about the library and the employee's role in it. Ideally, the perspective of a new employee heavily affects orientation design, and the resulting program attends to the employee's needs.

No single orientation program will be optimal for every library. However, whether creating a program from scratch or revamping the current orientation, all libraries will want to consider similar questions. What are the goals of our orientation program? What information should we convey to new employees? How can the orientation reflect our organizational culture? In what ways can we pace and sequence the orientation so that we avoid overwhelming the new hire? Who should have the responsibility for providing orientation, and what methods should we employ? How we

will evaluate both the new hire's progress and the success of the orientation program? Individual libraries' experiences addressing these issues can inform other libraries' orientation planning. Although no two libraries are identical, we can all learn from each other.

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# Perspectives on Leadership

*Continuing our series of interviews on leadership, presented here are the perspectives of four professionals from library educator to practitioner to academic dean and beyond.*

## Interview with Ginnie Cooper

### By Mary Augusta Thomas

**D**on't panic." As the leader of the public library system for the nation's capital, Ginnie Cooper believes these are powerful words in the midst of budget turmoil. Recently we spoke about her thoughts on being a library leader and on her specific challenges at the District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL). Cooper served as the tenth executive director of Brooklyn Public Library. In her three-and-a-half-year tenure,

Ginnie Cooper

Cooper said, she emphasized literacy programs. Prior to that, as head of Multnomah County's (Ore.) library system in Portland, Cooper oversaw the complete renovation of a central library built in 1912. Since 2006, she has served as DCPL's chief librarian.

### Q: How do you define leadership?

"Someone once defined 'leadership' as being in front of where people are going . . . and this definition works better for me than some kind of idea about leadership being magic somehow!" Cooper says.

Where are people going? For Cooper, it depends on who you are watching. Library staff want to be better at what they do, offer more consistent services, and make changes to meet library user needs. Local government cares about creating public value. A leader needs to know what the civic priorities are and what the library can provide that addresses them directly. In Washington, D.C., providing decent schools is a critical issue. The public library must do directly what it can to support educational efforts. The library-going public may define its needs differently. Local advocates want greater hours and enhanced collections and they bring valuable experience to the table.

"I do think that leadership is about setting the agenda," Cooper says. How does she frame the agenda locally?

Cooper relies on experiences, both her own and that of her professional colleagues. She has watched trends come and go, and identified several constants in broad areas—access, primarily through open hours; a library that is friendly and welcoming; providing services to children and young adults; and keeping collections relevant and up-to-date. People who come into the library are free to choose what to read, making a current and innovative collection a priority. Technology also plays a role in good library management, both in ease of use and in the information that it supplies. Beyond personal experience, Cooper relies on her professional associations for development and insight. LLAMA, the American Library Association, the Public Library Association, and particularly her board service on the Urban Libraries Council offer her regular discussion of professional issues and rich resources of new ideas.

"For me, it is about assuming that people want to work well and hard . . . and that they do mean to do their best," she says. How does one shape conversations with staff? Cooper believes that library staff members strive to do good work, but their roles and responsibilities have not been identified carefully, their good work recognized and praised, and that, frequently, no one is held accountable or assisted in improving. Cooper and her staff are working to get systems in place that keep things moving forward. This involves identifying priorities both for the system and for herself and stepping back from making decisions that should be made at different levels. Cooper focuses on what she can do that no one else can do for the library. She freely admits that it would be easy, after a long career, to get back into the operations of the organization, but it's not the best use of her time and talent. Decisions on budget, collections, and daily operations are handled at the appropriate levels of management. As chief librarian, Cooper recognizes the need for constantly keeping the bigger picture in front of the staff as well as the city council, and board of library trustees who have their own concerns.

### Q: What does transforming the D.C. Public Library mean to you?

In a May 26, 2006, article in *The Washington Post* on her appointment, Cooper's record rebuilding major library sys-

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tems made her stand out. "This is not just running a library," said John W. Hill Jr., president of the library board of trustees. "It is rebuilding an entire library system and managing an infrastructure project that could cost as much as $400 million."

From the start of her tenure, Cooper knew one of the primary challenges facing the library was the sheer number of issues raised when library advocates became involved in the detailed operations of the system. The first week on the job, she visited every neighborhood library, and then in the second week, every department. Getting to know the specific people who can make a difference, the leaders that can make things happen, was important. Cooper concentrated on setting goals, providing focus, asking questions and translating the board/public/elected officials issues to staff who have to take action.

To attack the daunting list of concerns, Cooper and her staff divided the issues into five big buckets that could be useful daily in decision making: service to children, youth, and teens; library as a community place; collections of books and other materials; technology; and adult literacy and learning. Her philosophy is to assemble the right team with varied skills and give them the opportunity to do the good work of which they are capable, back them up, praise what is good, and encourage even more. The direction was to develop a firm, even baseline before planning anything new. The five areas are an organizational structure for statistics for the board when forming budget priorities, and Cooper uses them when talking with staff on all major decisions.

DCPL staff are proud of their culture of meeting the needs of people who come into the library. Now they are also developing a culture of assessment that gives them benchmarks and service metrics to evaluate more fully the impact of their work on the community in general. Cooper places importance on the sharing of information more widely in the system to build a common vision for service. The board and the city have supported filling vacancies, some early funding increases, and beginning seventeen capital projects, including renovations and improvements to the landmark Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. Listening to the community and learning what works in other systems has resulted in big improvements including an 80-percent increase in collections use.

## Q: What is the role of middle management?

"The hardest job in the place!" Cooper says. "How do you develop more leaders at the library?" Last year, Cooper began a leadership program. The first group of thirty-five new managers spent one day each month working on real problems in the system which promoted cross-departmental collaboration that is already returning great results. As they identified blocking points, the group could take action that moved them forward, developing a culture of working together on mutual problems. A second group will be chosen by the first and the effort will continue to build qualified staff. Cooper hopes that similar problem-solving conversations are happening across the system. Recently, staff has organized brownbag luncheons that Cooper sees as a source of planning for the future, and coming from staff. Her role is to help guide these conversations, staying out of human resources, managing schedules, and daily operations. Cooper relies on senior managers who see mentoring and guiding those who work for them as one of their key tasks.

## Q: What is your strategy for leading through times of crisis?

Cooper, like the leaders of most public institutions, is facing severe budget challenges, and again, she cites her long view based on professional experience as underpinning her leadership style. Her professional colleagues offer her different models and their solutions might not be the ones she would choose for DCPL. She advocates working hard to determine what differences the library will still be able to make to the public—and then responding. Energy will be directed to the high-need areas; her instinct is that serving more of the community and expanding the audience for the library are crucial. The system is trying to reach more people, so the roles of the branch libraries and that of the central library are being redefined. A higher percentage of library materials now go to the neighborhood libraries. Through more rigorous analysis of usage, Cooper hopes to be able to target improvements to specific community needs. This includes providing more nonprint material that supports adult learning and literacy.

This brings us back to "don't panic." Cooper stressed that leaders need to realize they set the mood for the staff. It's vital to keep a positive outlook because no matter what happens to you personally, you are perceived as the boss. Your bad day is going to be misinterpreted. It's also crucial to frame situations positively, taking the "glass half full" stance.

Libraries have been her passion for thirty years. Cooper ruefully admitted that if she didn't love what she was doing so much, and didn't want it to be better, life might have been easier. In Multnomah County, the library survived eleven bond issues in thirteen years, proving the resilience of the value of what libraries do. Her frustrations come from wanting to change things and the effort it takes, but she stays keenly aware of the difference libraries make in communities and lives. As her mother told her, "I am not responsible for everything good and not responsible for everything bad." The words she selected as representing leadership provide a good framework for her style: focus strategic opportunity, support, and passion, and don't panic.