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We Love LIBRARIES!

We're all in this together

by Susan J. Schmidt

You may consider the phrase “We’re All in This Together” just the theme from Disney’s *High School Musical*, but in the library world it should be your mantra! No matter how big or small your library, whether it is public, academic or a school media center, everyone needs friends with a capital “F.” There can be many layers of friends organizations, library boards of trustees or foundations in your community. Whatever you call your group, we can agree that we are in this for the same reason — to support our libraries in the legislative process and with monies raised.

Another theme of life is that our daily actions and responses are very much like the kindergarten sandbox. There are certain unstated rules and customs that we all should observe for playing nicely together. The following separation of volunteers (friends and/or foundations) and staff (administrative, circulation or reference) not only shows the strength of each role but how important each can be to the other.

Library Boards of Trustees

Remember that the library board and administration set the direction for the library. But there should be every effort to include a nonvoting volunteer who represents friends or foundations on every library board of trustees, and vice versa. Communication is key to working together and reaching goals.

Friends and/or Foundations

To encourage communication, you should appoint a representative from each of these organizations to the board of the other. They don’t have to be a voting member of the board, just someone who will foster the exchange of ideas and keep information flowing. If you have a leadership role in your friends group, it is your responsibility to make sure everyone is playing nicely in the sandbox. The public shouldn’t hear about any conflict

or arguments with your board, staff or elected government officials. Disagreements should be handled with discretion, with an eye on the goal at all times, keeping in mind common efforts and the big picture. The public should always have a clear vision of your library’s needs and solutions.

Library Staff

There is no question that library staff, volunteers and advocates should be aware of all strategic plans and goals. It is always “how” that is the hard part. The library director should be an ex officio member of any volunteer board and be present at meetings. Library staff should show their appreciation for the support of volunteers.

Rules for Everyone:

- Please reassure everyone involved that there will not be any surprises: Staff shouldn’t surprise volunteers, and volunteers shouldn’t surprise the library director. There is nothing worse than reading it in the newspaper first!
- Don’t talk about anything on your agenda that may directly affect your library director, staff and volunteers unless you have told them first. It just isn’t fair.
- Clarity is so important. Everyone’s roles should always be spelled out.

This sounds so simple. It’s all the rules you learned in the sandbox in kindergarten. But when it doesn’t go smoothly, consider seeking an outside voice to intercede. Your university or community college is a good source for mediators. Remember: The success of your library, not the individual agenda, is what’s important. ►►

Susan J. Schmidt is a past president of FOLUSA (Friends of Libraries, USA), which is now ALTAFF (Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations). She is also an American Library Association division councilor and is one of the governor’s appointees on the Maryland Advisory Council on Libraries.