**Values in action: A conversation about library governance (transcript)**


**[Wayne]** Hi everyone, my name is Wayne Jones. I am the University Librarian at Carleton University. I've been in this position for about three years and I'm here with …

**[Kerry]** Kerry Badgley, I'm president of the Ontario Library Association and past president of the Ontario Library Boards' Association.

**[Wayne]** And we have, we have sort of a general topic, and three subtopics that we want to cover in this podcast. The first one is how do you define governance in general. I don't want to overemphasize the fact it as rules but I think of it as sort of the rules by which interactions in any kind of any organization are governed. And what I mean by interactions is w how people react with a committee, how a committee fits in a certain department, how the management makes its decisions, how the management delegates its decisions. So I think of governance sort of internally, within an academic library. Kind of the rules of order, the way that you kind of run the place.

I mean, in a sort of way, it's corporate but it doesn't have to have a corporate feeling about it. Basically, I think of it as how your library is set up administratively in order to get things done and what are the rules that apply to that to make things happen.

**[Kerry]** Right and I think that it is very similar in the public library context. Again, it's the rules, it's the accountability, it's the transparency within a public body. And I think you're absolutely right, it sort of sets the norms, the ethics, the overall broad goal of that institution as opposed to the management, which is the day-to-day. You know, for example, a public library has a heating issue in the middle of February, it's the CEO who would deal with that immediately and hopefully the Board, which is responsible for the governance, has a policy in place for what happens when there is a health and safety issue like a heater breakdown. That's one example.

But I think you're absolutely right, it's the rules, it's those broad strokes to let the institution do what it needs to do.

[Wayne] I think it's very important that it be very obvious to everyone how, what the governance is of an institution. This can't be some secret document that it's in a file, a dark file somewhere that no one knows about so that people in a certain way know where they fit and that people know what authority, for example, they might have in certain decisions. What certain other decisions are made by senior management and are basically implemented. I think for any institution, and maybe institutions either fail or are successful in this along a continuum. To an extent that something is very open like

that, that's very beneficial to everyone in the organization, right from the head of the organization to the person working at a particular job.

**[Kerry]** Exactly, and to all the other stakeholders. Within a public library board, that is the community writ large.

**[Wayne]** I also think too that it's something that needs constant kind of care and feeding. You can't really,  as I know that in my experience here at Carleton University, you can't really assume that okay, we've got governance things in place, we're good to go, we're good for the next three decades, [Kerry, right] that'll be fine. I don't mean that you have to be tinkering with it, but you constantly have to be aware of the fact that things change, the university sector changes, there are things that happen in the university's governance that change and are going to impinge on the university library itself. It's impossible to imagine it being something that's set in stone.

[Kerry] Exactly. And within the public library context, it's really relevant this year because we have municipal elections and new boards are going to be appointed to various public libraries. And they will come in and they will look at the strategic plan, they will look at the multi-year plan or the work plan and you're right, they don't necessarily have to go back and rewrite or rework it. But it'll be a good idea for them to have a look at it and then see where their library is. And that will be the, the critical path when they, they move forward.

**[Wayne]** It's interesting that you say the strategic plan, because we've been trying for a while now to implement one in our library at Carleton, and with some success and some failure.  But it's true, not only do you need a transparent governance, you also need a plan to go along with it. I think that applies in an academic library as well.

**[Kerry]** And that's the perfect segue into the next question, which is how does governance work in your particular institution? Maybe you can give some insights as to how it works at Carleton.

**[Wayne]** I can talk a little bit about it and it is sort of refers back to the various entities I was already referring to. You have the individuals who work in a library and you have, for example, my position as the head of the library and in between that you have all sorts of flavours of groups of people, you have committees that are there that are cross-departmental, you have departments themselves and how all those interact, that's how things happen here. And of course it can't be something that's completely disorganized and you can't have nineteen committees and two departments and without any kind of guidance.

It is important that any organization will run on, not only the departments that are part of it, you know the administrative structure, but there are sort of cross-departmental committees that get set up as well. Carleton succeeded to a certain extent and we certainly have work to do in some areas about accountability, openness which you referred, that sort of thing.

If someone is on a committee and a committee produces a report and that report gets submitted say to my office, for example, is the committee expecting that I will simply take that and that will be implemented or is the committee understanding that, well, that will now go to the Office of the University Librarian, there will be some massaging, or deleting or adding, or whatever that will take place there. And then actions will be taken? It's very important to be open about that from, from the get go, because if you're not, you're going to end up with people who are either disappointed, either because what they had wanted implemented doesn't get implemented [Kerry, uh, uh] or that something sits in the University Librarian's Office and nothing ever happens at all.

**[Kerry].** Right. You've touched upon what I think of as the essence of how governance works. I've always looked at it as an on-going conversation. That the Board has a conversation with the CEO, who's engaged in conversations with stakeholders and then the stakeholders can come talk to the Board. We have, again this openness. The Board meetings are open with very, very few exceptions. And it's really in those cases that expectations can be more realistically defined at that point.

You know, a committee comes back with a report about how we should be approaching collection development, or how we should be approaching adjusting the needs of the disabled in the community or what have you. And understanding that, you know, just because they've come with this document, that it's not going to be implemented lock, stock and barrel. There's going to be a conversation, there's going to be. I mean, the Board looks at these kinds of things, and says, well within the context of our budget this year, this is what's possible and this is what'll have to wait. So yeah, I think it's an ongoing conversation but again those people who are on the Board, who are responsible for the governance and the governance model are ultimately the people who are accountable.

**[Wayne]** I don't myself have any experience in public libraries. I'm curious from your own experience and from your own studying of it even, especially at that high level between the CEO and the Board itself, do people generally perceive that as a confrontational relationship or is it more making someone accountable or is it more reporting out on things that are happening or is it all of those things?

**[Kerry]** It's all of those things.  But it's really interesting that you should mention that because some people do see the relationship between the Board and the CEO as a potential site of confrontation and I think the better ones that I've encountered are those who see it as a partnership and see that the relationship as not looking to encroach on other peoples' territories.  I mean, the Board doesn't go in and worry about HR matters, that's the CEO's job, that's why they are paid the big bucks as it were. You know, it is an interesting dimension and then there's the other dimension within the public context, which is municipal council, the elected officials who actually control a considerable part of the purse strings. And so sometimes, the Board and CEO are then in a confrontational relationship with the municipal council. Ideally, again, it's, the council is supportive and are trying to fund and support the libraries to the fullest extent possible.

**[Wayne]** Maybe we can talk a little also then about  just to end off, about good governance and why does it matter at all [Kerry, laughs, okay].

**[Kerry]** Well, for us it is really the essence of a public board in a democratic society. We see that if everything is firing on all cylinders and that there's a good relationship with the CEO, and that there is a good relationship with the municipal council, there is a good relationship with the various professional associations, then it's one less thing that keeps people up at night. You know, it's never going to be the ideal but the closer you can get to it the better. And in your case?

**[Wayne]** One of the ways I see it, and maybe it's more narrow than the way, what your saying there, everyone knows the rule you're playing by. And it's very important also and again I would here at Carleton we've been successful in some regards and not so successful in others about being completely open about what's going on. There are things that happen frankly in an academic library that you cannot be fully, open is not the right word but everyone can't be privy to absolutely everything that happens in senior administration for example. But to the extent possible it's very important that it be very open and visible to people. You know, what are the rules we're playing by that sort of thing. Maybe that's not a good analogy.

**[Kerry]** No, I think it is because I mean, especially within both the university context and the public context, one issue that frequently involves the Board is the issue of intellectual freedom and it can create some very contentious situations. But when the CEO and the Board understand that these are the rules, then you know it makes it that much easier to develop a communication strategy, to develop an approach to dealing with people who are not particularly happy with the decisions that have been made.

**[Wayne]** And in a particular instance, like just taking a single academic library like ours here, I also feel too that you know, one of the things we're very concerned about staff morale. And just at a very kind of narrow, if I could put it that way level, if people understand sort of why decisions are made and what role they will take in certain decisions, and what decisions might get taken where maybe they might not have a role, at least that might contribute to some extent to helping with people being content in the institution because at least they may realize that, you know, it was said that I would have a say in this and I did get a say in that but if someone gets told they will have a say in something and they don't get a say in that, then deservedly speaking that's pretty poor governance management on the part of administration.

**[Kerry]** Right, and that you know to use the phrase that's when people end up owning things when they are not communicating those kind of things.

**[Wayne]** So overall, I think of it, I used to be, many, many years ago, twenty, thirty years ago, I was a cataloguer and we always wanted rules when we're a cataloger and I still believe in rules in a lot of ways. So I do think of governance in a way as being a set of rules but not something that's rigid. Just like modern cataloguers I think of cataloguing as a set of rules but not so totally rigid that they get away from the very point of why you're doing the thing in the first place.

**[Kerry]** Right because the rules effectively to me reflect the values of that institution and if that's kept in mind when the rules are being formulated then I think you have a pretty good set of rules.

_____

Kerry Badgley is a proud board member of the North Grenville Public Library, and has served as its president. At present, he is President of the Ontario Library Association (for 2018), and Past President of the Ontario Public Library Boards' Association (OLBA). He can be reached at [email].

Wayne Jones has been the University Librarian at Carleton University since 2015. He has held previous positions at Queen's University, MIT, and the National Library of Canada (way back when it was called that), and has also worked as a freelance editor. Wayne can be found at his website: waynejones.ca