

Don't Buck It - Bend It: Using the Established System to Increase Your Influence to Create the Working Environment You Desire

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In many schools the school librarian works in isolation, has a very busy schedule and is often overlooked for budgeting, decision-making and day-to-day communications. This leads to many feeling a sense of powerlessness over their own situation and self worth as a professional, with seemingly little opportunity for change. This paper addresses these issues and expounds on why influence is important for school librarians to achieve their goals and aspirations to bring their libraries to the high standard they strive for. The main body includes practical strategies to slowly but surely increase the influence of school librarians with the principals and other staff so they can be recognized as key players in children's education at their schools.

You as a school librarian have a unique role in the school - you interact with staff, students, parents and administrators, all day. You have a whole school perspective on what is happening and resources required, you know what is being taught by whom and when. You have the ability to spend lots of money on required resources, and to submit budgets for increases. You are autonomous in your library, it is your own little empire and you can organise it the way you want and have the policies and procedures you need to make things run the way you like them to. Within that arena you are the boss and you wield plenty of influence inside its walls – woe betide anyone with a lost resource or sticky fingers, and look out those rebel-rousers, you will be throwing them out in no time.

What happens when you walk outside? Do people know who you are? what your agenda is? what your skills and passions are and what you need to be able to make your library a better place for education for the whole school? Does your principal know and support your requirements fully, do they ask you for an opinion on what the ICT policy should be or the curriculum policy or changes? Do they listen to you when you need to ask for more money or changes to your day? Are they open to your suggestions? Do the staff know you and your passions, if you wanted to ask them a favour would they be happy to help? if you asked them to trial an innovative idea in the classroom would they prepared to give it a go just because you think its a good idea? How much influence do you wield outside your library in the wider school community?

Influence is not something we can give ourselves, it comes through the way in which others perceive us (Langford, 2000). Influence is measured by the desired behaviour and actions you can elicit from others. It is subjective, but at all times present, and is totally dependent on relationships and trust at any moment (Hartzell, 1997; Langford, 2000). Influence gives rise to increased opportunities, it gives a measure of control over our professional lives and empowers ourselves and others (Langford, 2000). Having influence in a work environment is akin to having the master key to everything - doors will open, how fast and smoothly they open depends on the depth of the relationships and the perceived value of this relationship. Influence in our work is paramount to having a high self-esteem and motivation to do better (Hartzell, 1997). Without influence a school librarian cannot be visible, without visibility, school librarians and their domains will continue to go unnoticed and undervalued (Langford, 2000; Hartzell, 1997). How visible are you and your library?

Influence is a significant agent for change to take place. People who are able to successfully implement change have influence with others who supported the motion and worked towards its success. Schools are full of changes, and they are continually changing. Fullan (1999) describes them as 'being on the edge of chaos' because there is so much change going on. In such a dynamic environment people expect change, however in most cases they don't like it and will only cooperate when it becomes necessary or they have a personal interest and can see the vision (Swanepoel, 1998). As a school librarian with your contacts with so many, your unbiased approach to curriculum, your skills in collaboration, sharing and learning you have the most potential to influence others in seeing the vision and gaining support for your ideas and motions for change.

So how can the teacher librarian increase the influence they have in the school without seeming pretentious, overstepping the mark or even undermining some ones else's authority?

The key to influence is relationships and making every relationship intentional. You gain influence by building, maintaining and expanding your network of relationships (Searcy, 2002). With this in mind, make an effort to know the people in your school from the principal to the caretaker. Know their names, say hello every time you meet with them, ask about them and their family, have small talk about the weather. Let them know you know them and care about them. Have lunch or morning tea in the staff room, or invite others to the library if you can't get out. As you build your relationship with them you will become closer with some, you will learn of their interests and concerns, their passions.

To build on and maintain these relationships, focus on the needs of these people (Searcy, 2002). Where possible look out where you can fill a need or want in other peoples lives. Keep a look out for special items of interest that might cross your path which will benefit them - articles, lesson ideas, resources bought just for their module or unit. Ask how you can meet a need of theirs - would they like help in planning a unit? finding a resource? "Going the extra mile" works in building relationships two ways. Firstly it indicates to the person that you are aware of and care about their needs - building the relationship on an emotional level. It also works on the theory that "you can get everything in life you want if you help enough other people get what they want" (Ziglar, 1984). Hartzell calls this the theory of reciprocity - if you help people, they will feel to be in your debt. Bonanno (1998) names it the "law of indirect return." It is naturally occurring human trait. To be able to have many people feel they are in your debt builds your potential influence when it comes to collecting the debt through favours and support, in many cases this can happen unexpectedly. Building a network and reciprocity with some people will be more important than others, however, all relationships are vital (Hartzell, 1994).

The relationship with your principal is essential to the success of the library and for the entire instructional program of the school (Hay and Henri, 1995). It should therefore be one of the most intentional and nurtured relationships that you have in your professional life. Treat your principal as a potential ally to be courted and supported rather than as an enemy which needs to be defeated (Hartzell, 1994).

The teacher librarian is usually not in an executive position, and they usually do not have a head of department overseeing their activities and being an advocate for them. The school librarian in most cases works directly with the principal regarding budgeting, policies, decisions, new programs, timetables and other key issues. It is imperative that the principal is aware of the library and its needs and is able to support initiatives and programs. To do this they need to know what they are. The school librarian has a responsibility to sell their role and their program to the principal to gain maximum support in good and lean times and to develop a relationship that is mutually influential for good.

Some suggestions by Hartzell (1994) to develop this relationship include having continual contact with the principal on meaningful issues such as monthly reports, meeting at the beginning and end of the year to talk through the mission of the library, goals and objectives for the year and evaluation. Term meetings or on as need basis to discuss initiatives which may be possible, throughout the year passing on vital information about the local education community or education in general, targeting articles and research on specific issues current on the school agenda, inviting the principal on purchasing opportunities and conferences. Come to him or her with possible solutions to your problems, rather than just problems. Back this up with a written action plan and act on it with their support, follow the job through and complete it to the best of your ability (Boyd, 2002).

Make the school look good through the library. Initiate successful literacy programs, be a speaker at conferences, become published in professional journals, offer parent workshops, enter competitions on behalf of the school, make the library a showplace of education. Participate on school committees and development groups, take an extra curricular activity. Invite the press to report on what your library is doing for education and ensure that your vision is closely aligned with that of the principal. Through all of this ensure you use the correct channels of communication and authority where initiatives are concerned. In everything you do focus on the benefits to the educational outcomes and the children. Through participation in these activities you are demonstrating that you can be relied on to be an advocate for the school and the principal. You can be trusted. You have integrity. You are visible.

Hay and Henri's (1995) study found that principals were prepared to rely on the professional judgment of the school librarian and support them as long as the teacher librarian demonstrated they were both reliable and credible. By being enthusiastic, consistent and striving for excellence in your professional life through the aforementioned activities, you are engaging the principal's attention while moving him or her in a positive direction (Bonanno, 1998; Searcy, 2002). You are empowering the principal through your good works and making them and the school look good, this will extend your influence through earning their respect and goodwill. No one is influenced by that which they ignore or do not respect (Searcy, 2002).

Good relationships with other staff at the school are also vital for survival (Hay & Henri, 1995) Build your relationships with your teaching peers. Talk to them about what they like, dislike, their problems, what they feel about issues, connect on an emotional level. This information will be vital to knowing them and their passions, catering to their needs and for discerning current and potential allies (Cohen).

Become visible to the staff outside of the librarian role—be an active part of the sport program, work with staff on projects, committees and groups, socialize with them, offer to teach skills that you have through staff development days or informally. Remember what people say to you that expresses an interest, need or a problem, even in casual conversation. If possible follow it up with something that meets that need, or is a solution to the problem. Talk with people about themselves and what interests them, ask questions, be prepared to learn and listen. Lisa Kirk said “a gossip is one who talks about others, a bore is one who talks to you about himself and a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself”. Become a brilliant conversationalist and your influence will grow without too much effort.

Within your role supply a service which is helpful and timely. This will ensure that staff rely on its use and become accustomed to its benefits. Make the library the centre of the school by helping teaching staff dependent on what you have. Let them know about the professional journals available, even copy some of them to pass onto the relevant people. Publish a staff newsletter or web page outlining the new resources, how they can be used and who they are targeted for. Schedule staff development days to teach how to access the resources they need, and educate how best you can meet their needs. Publish the policies and procedures of the library, ask for staff comment, set up a friends of the library group where they can discuss issues, resources and policies. Invite people to be involved in the formation of the library website so it will cater to their needs, not the libraries.

Resources are a school librarians best tool for building influence. They know what is available, they know who needs it. Matching these entities successfully will in itself build influence. Going one step further and making this pool of resources larger and more targeted increases the potential for influence (Hartzell, 1994). Aggressively showcase the resources. Staff must know what you have and what you offer, they cannot attach value to the things they don't know about. They will be more likely to support a service which they have come to rely on than one which they do not know about (Hartzell, 1994).

The non-teaching staff are also important to have a good relationship with. They have resources and services you need sometime, the law of indirect return affects you as well. Be good to these people, they can make you life as easy or difficult as they wish. A good example given by Hartzell (1994) is the principal's secretary, this person will be the one who will allow or block your road to improving your relationship with the principal. Their resource is the principal, and their influence is great.

Parents and students are also an important part of the school community who will support you when in need. Allowing parents to access the library resources gives you access to them, to get to know them. Invite them to help in the library as volunteers, they will then observe first hand what it is you do and how important it is to the school. Run workshops on skills they want to learn, have the library open on parent teacher nights for parents to visit, browse and meet you. Greet them, prepare a display of new resources, students work, serve hot drinks with snacks. Personalize the evening by talking to them about what they want to talk about. Parents can be powerful allies when it comes to budget cuts or improvements if they see a need.

Students are the most important part of the school—they are why it exists. Building influence through students will have an indirect influence on their parents and their teachers. Help the students be a part of the library through volunteer programs, take on board their suggestions for resources they want to access, offer programs of self-improvement, help them make sense of information. Make the library a place where they want to spend time, make it a place of learning. The students will express their appreciation through their actions - they will come and with your support they will be high achievers. This will make the school look good, in turn the principal and staff look good, and your influence will increase.

There are a number of other aspects about building relationships which need to be considered. One of these is relationships are forgiving and flexible (Searcy, 2002). No relationship will be perfect, so you must be willing to overlook imperfections in others and also be willing to apologise, forgive and ensure the relationship continues - this may mean being humble sometimes. If someone crosses you, find out why and talk through the problem with them, if you offend someone and they have let you know, apologise and move on. You need to remember that every relationship is an investment and you need to keep these investments working to be worthwhile.

Relationships are as unique as each person (Searcy, 2002). You need to treat each person as an individual with their own needs, desires and have relationships that reflect this difference. This behaviour will develop influence through respect that you are aware of individual needs, and everyone is given equity dependent on their requirements.

Good relationships are built on encouragement and empowerment (Searcy, 2002). How can you let people know they are doing a great job? To empower others you must hold them in high esteem and connect on an emotional level.

Relationships are a major player in building influence in a community, through relationships there are also a number of factors which have been identified as being essential for building influence.

Enthusiasm for the job, project, or need is contagious. People are drawn to someone who has a passion, a mission. They want to see what the excitement is about and they may even become as enthusiastic about it. If you believe in where you are going and you present it in an enthusiastic manner people will follow and support you (Searcy, 2002).

A person who commits to producing the best possible results through attention to details, and follow through stands up and demands attention. This makes you visible, earns you respect and you are viewed as having integrity. This in turn increases your influence. "Every job is a self-portrait of the person who did it. Autograph your work with excellence" (unknown). Striving for win-win situations in relationships is also essential for influence building. People find it hard to work with someone who is inflexible and stubborn and who likes to win at the expense of everything else. Ensuring the terms are equitable in every situation of conflict and compromise, and no one feels like a loser will build influence as you will be seen as fair, flexible and having integrity. What you may have lost in the negotiation will be invested in something far more lasting, meaningful and useful.

Being innovative and proactive are also important in the building of influence. Taking the initiative involves moving out of your comfort zone into areas of uncertainty, it benefits others as much as the initiator. It builds your influence in the school being seen as the brave one. Not everyone can initiate change because they are afraid of failure. Being a model of this behaviour will influence others to try to initiate programs or changes. Initiative is valued if it prevents problems, solves problems, multiplies the value of existing resources, makes jobs easier, makes others look more effective and helps them succeed. On this value rides more influence for the initiator. Having many small successful initiatives earns respect and credibility, so start small and often. When the opportunity arises for someone to initiate a

large project, you can take on the challenge, knowing you will have support through your previous earned influence and reputation. Hartzell (1999) states that people who have more initiative are allowed more failures than people who rarely take the initiative.

Proactive people anticipate and prevent problems, they identify what is needed before others, they try things, take the lead, take risks and follow things through. They persevere in pursuit of the objective with an understanding there are many equally effective ways to reach it (Hartzell, 1999). They act on principles and values rather than emotion or circumstance (Covey, 1997). Proactivity and initiative are usually together, and are highly valued by superiors. The teacher librarian needs to be proactive and effective in communicating their role to the principal and the wider community. As J. Paul Getty noted, "the man (or woman) who comes up with a means of doing or producing almost anything better, faster, or more economically has his future and his fortune at his fingertips." If humble and working for the good of the organisation, people respect innovators and proactive people, with this respect grows influence. "When your image improves, your performance improves" (Ziglar, 1984).

Taking responsibility for your own decisions, actions and innovations even if they were not successful in achieving their desired outcome will earn you a reputation of having integrity and honesty as will acting on your beliefs. Influence is built on integrity.

Striving for visibility and influence does have the price of continually being in the limelight, becoming busier, and constantly in demand. More is expected of you, and you need to continually maintain your influence through your relationships and commitments, however, when you submit your proposal for a substantial increase in budget, or for an innovative program, or for more staff and it is overwhelmingly supported by the principal, staff parents and students, you know it will be worth it.

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