

An Interview with the Free Library of Philadelphia's Siobhan Reardon

Erin O'Connell 11 February 2014

Siobhan Reardon is president and director of the Free Library of Philadelphia and the first woman to serve in this capacity. Since joining the Free Library in 2008, Ms. Reardon has overseen a comprehensive renovation to the flagship Parkway Central library; spearheaded an initiative to create internet outposts called Hot Spots that offer free internet access and job search classes in underserved neighborhoods; and begun the implementation of a significant organizational restructuring of her 700-member staff.

Can you describe your leadership style?

I am an incredibly decisive person. I don't like to sit around on decisions. I try to engage people as much as possible, but I can be unwavering at times. You're in a public library where democracy reigns, but it often gets to the point where it can be too much and somebody has to step in and make a decision. I am very involved in the day-to-day operation of this organization. I want to know where we stand. I want to know what the position of the Free Library is in Philadelphia. Do we have a foothold? Are we being

recognized for the work that we are doing? Is the ground stable or is the ground shifting for us?

What drives you? Is this your passion?

It is absolutely my passion. I came into libraries in 1987 (prior to that, I had been in corporate America). At the time, I never thought I'd spend more than five years in this field. More than 25 years later, I'm in the job that I love. I love being in Philadelphia. I love the space and the opportunity. I love what we're doing for Philadelphia and for the issues surrounding literacy. There's no other organization that has its feet in practically every single community in the city of Philadelphia.

Do you consider yourself an innovative leader?

I'm not sure I'm *truly* innovative. I think every brilliant, innovative idea is a copy of a pre-existing idea. I do love looking at what other forward-thinking organizations are doing. I like to see how other programs are delivered in the city, what other planning is going on. I always think to myself, "How can we take advantage of these ideas so we too can be a progressive, forward-thinking, energetic organization?" I also frequently support the ideas coming up from staff. If one of my staff wants to put their neck out there and try something out, I'll be behind it 100 percent.

Do I consider myself an innovator relative to library land?
You betcha.

How do you manage to stay current?

I'm probably over-connected. I'm on several boards and I'm deeply involved with our many partnerships—The Parkway Council, the Franklin Institute, the Please Touch Museum, Project H.O.M.E are only a few. I belong to any number of library organizations. I also pay close attention to the library listservs and keep up to date on what is happening globally.

All of this information just feeds my desire to answer the question: "What's happening and how do we have a presence here? How do we make this organization more nimble, more flexible and more current?"

What role does technology play in your organization?

If you don't keep up with technology, you fall behind. I get energized by the possibility of expanding our universe to a worldwide audience. How can we use technology to better broadcast our author series? How can we provide cutting-edge lending—loan e-readers and laptops?

Technology is key to adding vibrancy, vitality and breadth to how people think about this organization.

What is the greatest challenge you face in your position?

The Free Library and its Foundation are a city institution and a 501(c)(3) organization, respectively. The greatest

challenge in any nonprofit leadership role is always funding. As a city institution, significant challenges we face regularly are the rules and regulations surrounding hiring. There is a lot of rigidity around who you hire, how you hire, promotions, salary increases, etc. It's not nearly as nimble as I'd like it to be, and the rigidity around that process drives me crazy.

What characteristics do you need to work on as a leader?

I need to work on my time management. Without the support of my staff, I'm a disaster! I'm very involved in a lot of different things and the time management process is definitely a strength that I need to develop.

You mentioned that you worked in corporate America. How does a great nonprofit leader differ from a leader in the private sector?

I'm not sure that it does. The only difference between a nonprofit organization and a for-profit organization is where your money ends up at the end of the year. From a leadership standpoint, it's the same. Leaders in both industries need to have integrity. Your staff and your customers have to be able to trust you as a leader and that the decisions you're making are benefiting as many people as possible. It's imperative that both types of leaders make informed, ethical decisions.

What advice would you give emerging nonprofit

leaders in Philadelphia?

The first piece of advice I'd give would be to know your landscape—know exactly where you are and also know your political environment.

I'll tell you a story: In 2008, twenty days after I began my role here, I was handed a twenty percent budget cut. I immediately recommended closing eleven libraries because I still wanted to run a strong library system, with the remaining libraries open six days a week with good, long hours. We would be smaller, but in my mind, it would be a more effective way to run the organization. I truly thought I understood Philadelphia because I likened it to Brooklyn—a borough of neighborhoods, ethnically mixed communities, lots of churches... The political landscape, however, was beyond anything I had ever experienced. The decision received an unexpected amount of backlash. Sure, it was a good business decision to close the eleven libraries, but the social and political aspects of it would have been devastating.

The second piece of advice I'd give would be to make a lot of friends. Garner the full support of your board. If your board is committed to your mission, it will make your job significantly easier.

Lastly, keep in mind that you're going to grow wings. Know that the board and the community that surrounds your organization look to you for vision. All new leaders

come into their positions with exciting, new ideas. It may take several years to begin to develop a plan to invoke your idea. You'll get to it, just be patient about the process.

I love Parkway Central Branch. I live close by and I truly love coming here—it's a beautiful building.

It is a wonderful place! I love the capital projects that we're doing. There is a lot of thinking about what a space could and should be, and it's exciting to see our ideas finally coming to fruition. Librarians love clutter. We love our stuff and tend to create these towering "shantytowns" around our desks...and philosophically, that's just not good customer engagement. When you walk into Philbrick Hall now, it's a beautiful, light-filled room.

Other major cities' libraries have built new facilities that allow them to better address the changing way that patrons use libraries. The new designs have more computer areas. They have open, flexible spaces that can be turned into meetings rooms, health centers, or exhibition areas, depending on the wants and needs of the community. We, also, are working on moving away from the "stuff" and focusing on the individual who comes through the door.