The Rural Libraries & Social Wellbeing project asked community members about the qualities of their local librarian that make them effective. What emerged were the following characteristics: Caring, Outreach Oriented, Creative and Resourceful, Education and Literacy Oriented, Good with Kids, Welcoming and Personable, Actively Seeks Contribution from Community Members, Being Seen as of or from the Local Area, Provides Patient and Willing Support, and Provides Personalized Service.

These qualities are notable for a couple of things: they are not traditional library skills, for one thing; and they are mostly personal attributes that are hard to teach, for another.

This is a different way of looking at hiring--generally hiring a librarian involves asking about their experience in libraries or managing an organization, and placing high value on traditional skills, and professional certifications and memberships. When we hire rural librarians, we can intentionally seek out people who have the qualities from the list above that our community needs (say, making families feel welcome), rather than ask them library-specific questions about things they can easily learn (say, cataloging).

Our goal here is to recenter hiring around new priorities--priorities that come from the perspective of the community members being served--and from a social wellbeing perspective--a perspective that gives the library's role in social connection and mutual support its full value.

What's in this tool?

This tool has two parts: first a set of reflection questions to help you identify what qualities of a librarian your community needs most; and second, a set of interview questions that a library board can adapt to their hiring needs.

IN THEIR WORDS

"I think the way she does it, it's got that human touch. Because it's out of love. It's not for the paycheck. It's out of love for the community. No, you can't teach those qualities."

Elizabeth, interview #6-1-10

Research Findings
Key takeaways from our research include:
- Education level not the prime determinant of success
- Outreach orientation is key
- Being patient is more important than being an expert
- Community members appreciate when their librarians indulge their interests and talents
- Seeking contribution from community members helps them build a sense of belonging and mutual support
- Tailored service has a deeper meaning to people, who want to feel seen, known, and valued
- A librarian can be seen as "of" the community even if they are not from--or even live in--the town where you work

Reflection Questions
Note: These questions are written with Library Board Members in mind, but can be equally used as self-reflection questions for librarians.

Town Needs: Consider your town and your library's current role in the town. How true are these statements below, either based on the way the library is now or in recent memory.

Rank by: Very true (4), Somewhat (3), Sort of (2), Not really (1), Not at all (0), & jot down any thoughts you have as you go.

Caring
_____ The library staff are more concerned with the success of others over their own success or their own convenience.

_____ Library staff seem authentically to care about every individual in town, even the ones that are more difficult to serve.

_____

_____

Outreach

_____ Everyone in town knows where the library is, when it is open, and what it offers.

_____ The library staff are passionate about their work-- they want everyone to use the library and come to all of their programs.

_____

_____

Creative/Resourceful

_____ Library staff can do amazing things on a shoestring budget.

_____ Our library always feels new and fresh.

_____

_____

Education/Literacy Oriented

_____ Library staff are passionate about education, which is important because they don't have many other opportunities nearby.

_____ Our library makes a big deal about literacy initiatives like the summer reading program

_____

_____

Good with Kids

_____ Children want to come to the library often and then do not want to leave once they are there

_____ We get great turnout for youth programs because the kids just love the library staff

_____

_____

Welcoming/Personable

_____ Everyone in town feels very comfortable coming into the library and spending time in the library.

_____ Anyone in town would not think twice to ask the staff for help if they have a question.

_____

_____

Seeks Contribution

_____ Most library programs were the idea of a community member and the library just helped to make it happen.

_____ The staff are great at getting neighbors to pitch in to help out, at the library and in the community in general.

_____

_____

From/Of the Local Area

_____ People who live here call the library "our" library and the librarians "our" librarian.

_____ Library staff take part in community events outside of the library.

_____

_____

Patient and Willing Support

_____ Library staff will spend a lot of time helping someone without complaining even if it means they are getting behind on other work.

LIBRARY DIRECTOR TOOL

_____ Community members think of the library staff as experts in everything, jacks of all trades

_____

_____

Personalized service
_____ Library staff have ways of making people feel special, by buying books from authors they like and things like that.
─────── Library staff go out of their way to help newcomers become active in the community by find-ing out what their interests are and making them feel a sense of community connection

_____

_____

Considerations for Boards
Now, look at how you answered the questions above. Which are areas that the library could improve in? In which areas would improvement provide big benefits to the community?

Our community would really benefit from:

_____

_____

_____

Current library or library staff strengths that we don't want to ever lose:

_____

_____

_____

Things we would really like to improve:

_____

_____

_____

So, some qualities we may want to focus on when hiring are:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Self-Improvement considerations for Librarians

First, if you are human, then there are probably a few things that you did not score highly on. But that's the whole point of this exercise. Make some notes below out of what you've reflected on so far:

Some things that I would like to improve that may be out of my comfort zone, but with practice I can really get better at!

_____

_____

_____

Some things I am able to do that I just need to pay more mindful attention to:

_____

_____

_____

Some things that I would like to improve that may be out of my comfort zone, but with practice I can improve steadily and eventually feel comfortable with:

_____

_____

_____

Some things I can takes class to learn more about:

_____

_____

_____

Work-around ideas for things that simply don't come naturally to me:

_____

_____

_____

Interview Questions

Below are a series of interview questions corresponding to the qualities in the reflection questions above. You can use these as is or adapt them however you would like as part of your interview process. They are intended to supplement, not replace, your usual questions. They are based on the premise that it is usually a more accurate indicator to hear someone tell you about what they've done in the past than what they imagine doing in the future.

Consider also how you might adapt these for a job description, position opening announcement, etc.

LIBRARY DIRECTOR TOOL

Caring

Tell us about a time when you helped someone else even though it was difficult or inconvenient.
What gives you the most job satisfaction?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Outreach

Tell us about a time when you raised awareness about a project you were involved in. What did you learn from that process?
Tell us about a time when you felt very passionate about something and then helped to make a change for the better.
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Creative/Resourceful

Tell us about a time when you made something amazing happen even without a big budget.
Describe a time when you had to be creative in your personal or professional life to get something done.
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Education/Literacy Oriented

When in your life have you played the role of teacher or educator?
What is your experience with books and libraries?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Good with Kids

What ages of kids are you most comfortable working with and why?
How do you get teenagers to come to a library program? How would you help teenagers feel welcome at the library?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Welcoming/Personable

If I asked your friends to describe you, what would they say?
Describe what an ideal experience for someone coming into the library would be like
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Seeks Contribution

Tell us about a time when you were able to get a volunteer to help.
What is your experience with community groups, neighborhood committees, or similar collaborations?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

From/Of the Local Area
What is your favorite thing about this town and what events do you take part in?
How would you describe the last place you lived in? What words would you use to describe the people in the town where you used to live?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Patient and Willing Support
Tell us about a time when you helped someone even though it meant getting behind on other work.
What skills or character traits are most beneficial to helping someone learn something new?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____

Personalized service
Please describe a time when you helped someone.
What do you think was the most important part of that interaction? What did you do that was beneficial to the person you were helping?
What will you listen for when you ask this?_____

_____