

New Routes to Library Success

Elisabeth Doucett. *New Routes to Library Success: 100+ Ideas from Outside the Stacks*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2015. 240 pp. \$55.00. Paperback. ISBN: 978083891313.

Another book on library success — what can it possibly have to offer that is truly “new” as indicated in the title? Actually, quite a bit. Traditionally, libraries employ one of two methods when seeking to improve. One approach is researching what is in place, analyzing its success, then adapting it to your situation. The second approach is used by the author, Elisabeth Doucett. She goes “outside the stacks” to non-library settings to investigate why some businesses are so successful in key areas that are also important for libraries. Doucett is uniquely qualified to employ this method. She is the director of the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick, Maine, with an MBA in marketing from the J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University, and her first career was in business.

She takes this “outside the stacks” approach because she isn’t interested in incremental change but transformational change. She focuses on great things being done by flourishing businesses and suggests ways that a library could adapt them.

Although written from the vantage point of the public library, the book presents ideas relevant for all types of libraries. It begins with an explanatory chapter that outlines the author’s process for selecting companies to interview and shares what she hoped to learn from them. Doucett developed a twelve-step process that progresses from “identifying what you want to learn from an organization” to “narrowing the focus of the ideas garnered from that organization so they are executable” (2, 6).

Each subsequent chapter is a self-contained unit, devoted to one company and topic. These include:

- Entrepreneurship
- Creativity
- The Extraordinary in the Ordinary
- Advocates for the Creators
- Customer Service
- Trend Tracking
- Learning your Community
- Creating a Great Workplace
- Content Curation
- Unconventional Thinking

As an example, the focus of Chapter 9 is “Creating a Great Workplace.” Doucett interviewed the executive director of the Maine Community Foundation, Meredith Jones, to find out why her organization has such a great reputation for its workplace environment. Thoughts that Jones shared as being essential for that status are

- The leader enjoying working there
- The importance of being customer-centric
- Working collegially
- Accountability

- Opportunities for staff to express their opinions
- Developing strong channels of communication

Jones has what might initially seem to be unconventional ideas about hiring. She advocates hiring for fit and attitude, not necessarily experience, then training for skills, with the expectation that everyone hired will be an “A” employee (178). She also suggests, before interviewing job candidates begins, writing a profile of the ideal employee — not a job description but a subjective sketch that includes everything that is important for the position (178). Doing this helps to clarify before the process commences what is significant for the ideal candidate to possess beyond the required skill set (179).

Overall the book offers a variety of ideas that could lead to library success. Just as important might be the thinking sparked by the concepts presented. The chapter on entrepreneurship, for instance, presented a company whose singular concentration on customer service caused me to wonder: “What is the most important thing that my library does? Is that reflected in my work? If not, what needs to change so that it is?”

Doucett is systematic in her approach to gathering and presenting the findings from her interviews. Her writing style is clear and easy to understand. Each chapter ends with helpful sections on the big ideas from each interview, a summary of what was learned, resources, and the interview questions. She even offers suggestions for how your library could do the same type of interviewing.

Should your library purchase this book? I can’t answer that. However, I think all librarians would benefit from reading it and reaping the benefits of getting out of the library mindset and considering what the non-library arena has to offer for invigorating our workplace.

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