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Are we there yet?: setting direction in an uncertain world

Taking on a new role can be challenge enough. Taking on a new role in a sector that is new to you, another challenge. Doing this while moving to a new city and a new country adds further complexity to a landscape that requires a great deal of navigation. In April this year, when I became CEO and State Librarian of the State Library of Victoria, I not only found myself in this situation, I had deliberately sought it out. When people ask me why I wanted to do this – apart from the draw of the amazing library, its staff, collections, building, and communities – I say because I could. But what I really mean, if I scratch the surface a little, is I wanted to challenge myself and we only really learn and develop when we are out of our comfort zone. I believe that this applies to individuals, to organisations, and to professions.

One of the most challenging and stimulating aspects of leading a library – and indeed any team and organisation – is the setting of direction and the strategy to enable us to get there. If we don't say clearly where we are going, how will we know we have got there? And how can we effectively align our collaborative effort to priorities if they aren't clear? So we need to make some choices, yet we live in an uncertain world where it would be naive to predict the future. At the State Library of Victoria we have been grasping this ambiguity while developing our new strategic direction over the past few months, and I wanted to share with you the approach we have taken.

1. Use data, evidence, and ideas from multiple sources. Be clear that all views and data will be used to inform the strategy while also being clear that the strategy will not be the sum of all those parts.
2. Ask the people we are here to serve. Be willing to listen and really hear the different voices. Know that we will also include in the strategy what we think people will need in the future that they may not necessarily identify now (that is our role as professionals).



3. Ask staff from across the whole library, provide different channels for them to provide input on as wide a range of topics as possible. It is amazing what you hear if you ask and genuinely want to know.
4. Ask stakeholders and continue to engage them in ongoing conversations.
5. Once we have asked people for their input, close the loop and feed back to them what we learned and how it was used.
6. Don't spend time justifying our own existence; it is a monumental waste of energy. Focus on a positive future and the positive impact of libraries.
7. Don't try to predict the future; develop a strategy that is flexible – and indeed confident in its flexibility – and based on people (both the people who make the organisation what it is and the people who we serve). Base future direction on our unique assets and on core values while also continuing to ask questions about why and how we do things, and how could we do this differently.
8. Once the direction and strategy are in place, align everything in the organisation to ensure implementation, including evaluation and reflection, so we learn from things that go well and not so well.

The community engagement aspect of our approach has been particularly interesting and helpful. As we have thought about the State Library's future directions and priorities, we have been keen to hear the views of the people that we are here to serve, the Victorian community, and have embarked upon the State Library's first major program of community engagement. Within ten days of being launched the *Your State Library, your say* website had received over 1700 visits and nearly 500 people had completed a survey. Visitors to the website also responded to a quick poll and some used the option to make comments, or ask

questions. Social media channels were critical to this quick response.

While most of the visitors to the *Your State Library, your say* website have been library users, the views of over 400 non-users have been separately canvassed, and strategies implemented to engage specific target groups that the library traditionally finds it harder to reach. These groups include regional Victorians, our culturally and linguistically diverse community, and children. A child-friendly version of the library survey has been administered in classrooms around Melbourne.

So far we have gathered invaluable data about how people rank the importance of the library's collections, facilities, and services. We have found out what would make them more likely to use the State Library, and what they would miss the most if the State Library ceased to exist.

To return finally to the question 'Are we there yet?'. With regards to developing the State Library's direction and strategy, we have started on a fascinating and challenging journey. Our next phase will be the articulation and communication of the direction and strategy, and the hard work on making it a reality. For libraries, and for those of us who are committed to being a part of their present and future and to making a difference for our communities, we must keep our eyes on the road and on future horizons. Our ability to set direction and strategy, while also being comfortable with uncertainty, will be key to successful navigation.

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