

Working Together: Thriving With Minimal Outside Help

How confidence, communication, and community can result in a happier staff and public computers that hum.



In a small mountain town in southeastern New Mexico, Phyllis Reed directs Ruidoso Public Library with little outside technical help. Despite its somewhat oxymoronic name (Ruidoso means “noisy” in Spanish), and the fact that the clientele population snowballs during the winter, the library runs smoothly and efficiently. This efficiency is due, in large part, to the director’s unspoken rule of thumb: give people a fish and they’ll eat for the day, but teach them how to fish and they’ll eat forever. Reed believes that everyone - colleagues and clients alike - benefits best by sharing, by not hoarding information, and by daring to problem solve and learn as a team.

Ruidoso is in high demand throughout the year, as it is only one of two certified libraries in its rural county; the other is a small volunteer library in a nearby city. In the winter, the town of 12,000 people swells to as many as 50,000 people for the ski season and the need increases exponentially. While sudden swarms of tourists have the potential for causing friction in any community, Reed works to uphold the library’s mission statement, which is “to provide diverse cultural opportunities for reading, learning, and enrichment to citizens and visitors of the Ruidoso area.” She recognizes the dollars that the tourism trade brings to the library, and has worked to turn this around to everyone’s advantage.

Seeking a better way

When Reed first started work at the library five years ago, a library tech assistant helped patrons use the three computers available for public use. Patrons signed up for the computers at the front desk, which sometimes resulted in long lines and always resulted in a considerable amount of staff time. Frustrated, Reed and her colleagues looked for ways to improve the situation. They sought out the help of nearby Eastern New Mexico University, who provided the library with enough computers to create a lab. With the new lab in place, staff

created a checkout system that gave patrons small metal flags with barcodes on them that helped track computer usage.

But Reed, still dissatisfied with the amount of staff time required for this checkout system, kept researching other options until she came across Useful's DiscoverStation. According to its Web site, Useful's DiscoverStation "is the perfect solution to provide 'indestructible' computer and Internet access."

Reed and her staff set up two Useful labs of eight DiscoverStations in the common area. A third lab in the children's library has five computers, and a fourth in the teen area has four computers. Although Reed has a contracted programmer and the city has a systems coordinator for "anything major or big", she says that she has "taught her whole library staff to fish." In other words, since no one staff person can be everywhere all the time, everyone learns together. Useful employees installed the first two labs for the library because Phyllis thought, "oh my gosh, we'll never get all this connected--but it's just so simple. We put in the children's lab and the teen lab ourselves. It's just unpack and plug in, nearly. It's all set to go." Now Reed is working toward having staff do everything themselves, and only contacting the company if they have problems.

Learning it together

Reed's shared knowledge strategy is working. She instills confidence and calm in her colleagues with the mantra: "There is nothing you can do that we can't fix." Reed recently left town for a conference and staff rose to the occasion in her absence, fixing a problem that arose with ease. Her colleague exclaimed, "Wow, great direction. We just did it exactly like you said and everything's back up and going." While problems used to be a source of anxiety and even the former tech assistant would call the city's systems coordinator, now the majority of the work is calmly and confidently done in-house. Reed has "definite instructions for everything," and now her colleagues tell her, "Oh, I can do that. I can reboot that server. That's not hard." Reed's realism is healthy and supportive: she tells her staff that because no one person could possibly keep up with everything there is to know in the quickly changing world of technology, the only way to combat the issue is to learn together.

Shared knowledge among staff also means that the library's patrons are served by a cadre of people instead of just one. This shared expertise comes in handy when patrons have minimal computer experience, or when the library offers simple classes on computer use to the public. As with any course, Reed's colleagues must know

their content in order to be able to teach it, and they, too, learn from their teaching.

Invite the community

Reed's team player attitude also extends to her teenage clients. When teens wanted a separate space for themselves apart from the children's area, Reed and her colleagues set up a Teen Lab upstairs with a selection of books, magazines, and periodicals, and computers to do homework, access the Internet, and play games. More recently, they added chess tables next to the computers for the booming chess club. The library's teen board, which solicits teens' opinions and input about the lab, ensures that these patrons have a say about their turf.

Ruidoso's teambuilding also includes partnerships and relationships with the greater community, and Reed has no problem soliciting their help. As she explains,

"You've got to get out there and tell them the good things you're doing and the good things you want to do with technology and how it all is a part of the whole library and information access. You just have to ask people for money."

She asks for donations in exchange for official recognition visible on the computer equipment, and this deal has paid off: the generous donations of local organizations and clubs played a big part in funding one of the labs. "We even had the Eagle Scouts who donated for the computer lab so that they could use the teen area, and then they've taken a big part in having the chess club come about. So actually, the whole community has come together." Ruidoso also has a partnership with a local college that only has a small lending library. College students are encouraged to come practice their skills at the library when their computer lab is full.

Phyllis Reed has built a strong, fearless staff, strengthened relationships with her regular and itinerant patrons of all ages, and has fostered partnerships with the community at large. And when you have collaboration and teamwork and a positive attitude in-house, you don't need a lot of external help. And, as Reed said, "it's so fun when I hear them say, 'I did it.'"