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Keynote

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Biography

Josephine Bryant is City Librarian at Toronto Public Library, Canada's largest public library system. Created in 1998 through the merger of seven former municipal libraries, Toronto Public library has 98 branches and an annual budget of \$115 million. It is the fifth largest system in North America.

Innovation has been the mainstay of Jo's leadership style, and has played a major role in the consolidation of the seven former library systems into one. Jo is active in the library profession through library associations and as a speaker. She is a member of the International Network of Public Libraries sponsored by the Bertelsmann Foundation, a members of the Board of Directors, Canadian Institute for Historical Micro-Reproductions and a member of the Canadian and American Library Associations.

Jo received her Bachelor of Library Science in 1970, and her Masters in 1974 from the University of Toronto. She held a variety of positions in corporate and public libraries before joining North York Public Library in 1983. Rising quickly through the ranks, she achieved the position of Chief Executive Officer at North York Public Library in 1988. She became the first City Librarian for the merged Toronto Public Library in 1998.

Leadership

Introduction

It was Winston Churchill who said that Britain and America were two great nations separated by a common language. Thank heavens no such separation exists between our two countries. Although yesterday, when I got in a cab at the airport and told the driver we should take a quick route to the hotel, he gave me the strangest look.

Okay, perhaps there are some differences, but, both Canada and Australia have small populations set in gigantic spaces, and we both need to survive in a much larger world. These realities cast us as being open, contrarian and outward-looking. But I've found when it comes to getting things done, those are the very qualities that help us succeed.

Nowhere was this more true than in Toronto in 1998 when we were asked to amalgamate seven library systems into one. The reason for that request was simple. Toronto itself was amalgamating.

A recipe for excellence?

Not a recipe for excellence, to be sure. Yet today, the Toronto Public Library is the busiest library in North America, and one of the largest and most successful library systems in the world. It has a reputation for relevance and innovation that sees its programs imitated elsewhere. Indeed, no other large urban library system is used more on a per capita basis than Toronto's. Every week, more than 300,000 people visit our 99 branches and borrow more than half a million items.

Such superlatives naturally raise some questions that I will try to answer for you this morning: How did it happen? What can be learned from the Toronto example? And what can you take away from the next half hour that will persuade you that each of us here has the power to create change far beyond what you think is possible?

I believe there are three lessons from the Toronto experience that can be applied to other systems and realities.

Lesson One

A problem redefined is a problem half-solved. I viewed the massive external change imposed on us not as a crisis, but as an opportunity. Looking back, I now see that this early and fundamentally contrarian view became the driving force of our success.

Lesson Two

Have a vision. Make it bigger than you can ever dream of. And align it with your city. Our top priorities for serving the public paralleled those of the new city that was also busy transforming itself. This gave us an opportunity not to follow in the city's wake, but to help lead Toronto in where it was already going.

Lesson Three

Build a strong team of people around you who thrive on ambiguity, discomfort and new ideas. In 1998, every manager in Toronto's new library system was asked to compete for their own job, including myself. Daunting? Yes. But, it was also an opportunity to position the best and brightest people to lead an organization that would not only be

much bigger, but vastly different and more demanding.

I won't pretend I'm a leadership expert. I'm a librarian who found herself in the right place to exercise my beliefs on a very large scale. But I believe the transformation of Toronto's Public Library is ultimately a story of the kind of leadership that public libraries can exert in today's world, if they seize the opportunities in front of them.

I also believe librarians have a more central and seminal role to play and it is up to us to capitalize on this growing opportunity to move public libraries into the mainstream of cultural life and economic promise.

So let me tell you our story.

Chapter One

The first chapter is about redefining reality. Amalgamations may give the public a bigger library system to use, and the staff a wider scope for their careers. But the very word invariably heralds cutbacks in budgets, staff and service. Yes, we were forced to reduce our newly-combined budget of \$120 million by \$10 million. We also had to reduce our staff of 2,000 by 10%.

Another indicator: during the time it took us to complete the amalgamation, our user-satisfaction ratings didn't fall, as they invariably do in a merger when the staff is naturally focused on internal issues. No, our satisfaction ratings rose during the upheaval of the merger. People were happier with their library while their branch was being amalgamated than before. This never happens. Just ask your bank. But it did with us because we were determined to

keep our focus always on the communities we serve. We were, and resolutely are, always outward-looking. So our main task was not to establish our relevance, but to expand it and deepen it.

For me the question was, how? After all, Toronto had become, almost overnight, the fourth largest urban area in North America.

And this brings me to the second chapter of my story.

Chapter Two

It's a longer one because it deals with crafting a vision, making it as big as the opportunity we saw before us, and realizing that vision by aligning it with the vision of the city we are mandated to serve. I remember clearly writing out my own vision of what this new and undefined *thing* could be.

What I wrote was: "A New Library for a New City for a New Century." I confess I wrote that for my job interview. I wasn't sure how it would evolve. But I wanted to make the connection clear between the huge changes facing the world at the beginning of a new century, the unique characteristics that defined Toronto, and the fact that simply building a bigger version of our old library systems would squander our true promise and serve no one well. We had to do new things in new ways. And that demanded that we take a new perspective on just about everything.

My style is highly collegial. Teamwork is paramount to me. But I felt that if we were going to be faithful to our vision, we had to create not a comfort zone among our team, but a discomfort zone.

After all, you can't wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time.

So I deliberately set about assigning managers with long experience in one area to an entirely new area. By definition, this was also a much bigger area, and experts in a 16-branch system had to become experts in a 99-branch system.

After the fear wore off, after the falling back on old ways faded, our people started coming up with new ways of being relevant to our users. I think the greatest testament to the success of enforcing new perspectives comes in the fact that eight years after amalgamation, we still have the same number of staff and the same number of branches that we had in 1999. And yet the range and depth of our activities have risen dramatically.

Our latest strategic plan that will lead us through 2007 spells out the four key priorities that closely paralleled those of the new City of Toronto in 1998 and even more so today.

They are: books and culture, youth, newcomers and low-income neighbourhoods, perhaps not so different from your city's priorities. But in Toronto, they each have a special relevance, and the public library plays a growing role in meeting the challenges presented by each one. I'll start with books and culture.

Toronto is a city of omnivorous readers and has been since long before amalgamation. Today, despite the decline in newspaper readership all over the world, Toronto now has seven daily newspapers. This is more than any

other city in North America. And while there has been a 7% decline in the reading habits of Americans over the last 20 years, there has been no such decline with Canadians.

That interest in reading spills over into the other arts as well. Right now, Toronto is undergoing a cultural renaissance on a scale that exists nowhere else in the world. Today, there is over a billion Canadian dollars of new arts infrastructure rising up on Toronto's streets. One billion dollars! That translates into \$1.17 billion Australian or \$900 million American. Those gigantic sums will go to build an art gallery designed by Frank Ghery; a museum designed by Daniel Libeskind; a new opera house, ballet schools, arts centres and conservatories. It seems in Toronto that architecture has come to the fore in a huge way in the service of arts and culture.

But the same thing is happening with Toronto's library system. Sure, it's on a smaller scale. But we are reflecting the city's strong commitment to develop public space with strong architecture. In 1999, our capital budget for branches was \$2 million. Back then, all the interior walls of our branches had to be painted in white, because it was cheap and would offend no one. I remember being told by politicians who were against spending any money for design: "Who needs excellence in architecture?"

Yes, it's always a fight making the connection between good design, healthy neighbourhoods and prosperous cities. But we got the money, and today, our annual capital budget for branches is \$14 million. Still not much, but some of Canada's top architects are lining up

to transform those branches into neighbourhood jewels. And since the outset, we have poured almost \$81 million into the restoration of our branches.

We're constantly pushing libraries into the mainstream of Toronto's cultural and economic life. Earlier this year, we created the Book Lovers' Ball, now an annual event which was hosted this year by our Mayor, David Miller, and by Booker prize-winner, and Torontonian Margaret Atwood. Dozens of authors came, as expected. But we also had high-profile business, political, entertainment and even sports figures among the hundreds who helped make the venue a central clearing house for the city's power elite.

But there's another extraordinary quality beyond books and culture that's found in Toronto. We are a magnet for immigrants. Over 100,000 newcomers arrive on our doorstep every year. Our citizens speak 100 languages and come from over 85 nations.

It was clear in 1998 that if we followed behind the huge growth in our immigrant population, we would fall behind what we needed to be to the citizens of Toronto. Today, we actively collect materials in over 40 languages and hold titles in over 100. We not only place our language collections where those communities live, but in some cases, where they work and shop.

In recent years, Canada's immigration policy has focused on attracting highly educated people from abroad. This has created different language and cultural needs from the earlier waves of immigrants to our country. What they

need today is accreditation to practice as engineers, architects, lawyers, and doctors in Canada. These newcomers tell us that we are the first place they visit when they come to Toronto, often within days of their arrival.

So we invite in the federally-funded specialists in housing, employment and advanced language training, to help immigrants in all of Toronto's neighbourhoods get the assistance they need, without having to go to different places to find it. We were the first library in Canada to bring such comprehensive immigrant assistance into our branches, and I'm proud to say this initiative has spread to many other systems across the country.

It's no surprise that youth are also one of the city's major priorities. At a time when the Canadian population is aging, we've seen a 17% increase since 2001 in the number of users who are between 15 and 24. One reason for this, of course, is they're drawn to the library by free internet access. But many of them are also the sons and daughters of immigrants, families where education and learning are highly valued. For them, a library is not only a source of information, but a place of study and work. Also drawing young people into the library is the diversity of our youth collection – from graphic novels and manga, to anime and CDs of local bands in Toronto.

While Toronto is a city of readers, a city of immigrants and a city of youth, it is also a city with its share of social problems. Drugs, street gangs and teenage shootings grab the headlines and hold some communities in fear. Obviously, restoring peace and order in

these neighbourhoods is a major priority for my city as it may be for yours.

Yet even here, the Library is establishing its relevance by connecting to the City's purpose and helping to resolve some of its toughest issues.

Malvern is a working-class neighbourhood in the north end of the city. It is what we call a high-needs neighbourhood. Last year, we re-opened the Malvern Branch to serve a community of 158,000 people and the highest proportion of children and youth in the city. Everything about that Branch was designed with the special needs of the community in mind.

It has 43 public computers because they tend not to be available at home. And because a high proportion of its population is recent immigrants for whom English is a second-language, the Malvern Branch has a dedicated space for adult literacy training.

Malvern also acts as a public meeting space, with meeting rooms, as well as quiet and group study space – mainly because there's not much of this at home, either. And the community has told us we got it right. Since the branch reopened, usage at Malvern is up by almost 80%.

Another branch in a high-risk neighbourhood is Albion. Close by the streets that saw gang warfare break out last summer, we created a Youth Advisory Group who now produce their own neighbourhood e-zine and who even became involved with, of all things, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

So it's not just lots of young people flocking to a public library. That alone

contradicts conventional wisdom. It's young people you'd never expect, in your wildest dreams, coming through our doors. And they're not just using the library system, they're giving back to it. They're volunteering.

Now that's relevance!

But that's not all. We also recruited a Somali librarian to work at the Albion branch, which by the way, was no easy task – not only to find any Somali librarian, but also one who was so incredibly talented. In fact, she has so successfully connected with the youth of her community that staff have told me they often see the kids following her around the library. Her impact has been hugely positive among this group of immigrants who have felt marginalized elsewhere in the city.

Last year, these and others of our large library branches became a part of the Mayor's Community Safety Plan, and models for how libraries can address broader social issues through their collections, their programming and their design.

I've held off talking specifically about management until the third and final chapter of my story. Yes, I told you a bit about the virtues of discomfort. But I want to round out my remarks by leaving Toronto and focusing on you and me and our profession. Because that's where I think the most important lesson from Toronto comes.

Chapter Three

It can teach us all that if we see opportunity in upheaval, if we create a vision that's both large and aligned, and if we constantly seek out new ways to

reinforce our relevance; we can fashion a much larger success than we ever thought possible. But none of this can happen without strong people management, at all levels and strongly making the case for libraries at every turn.

From our 1998 vision came our strategic plan that laid out our key objectives. From that plan, which we constantly monitor for relevance and do-ability, came our annual workplans and deliverables, including individual performance plans for every one of our 1,800 employees.

Such a multi-level management framework may sound stifling, smothering ideas instead of nurturing them. But the opposite has been true. This framework gives our people the freedom to be as creative and innovative as possible, within a system of individual and departmental accountability. With this kind of framework, I've never had to be a micro-leader.

Our management structure gives me the time and freedom to do what Chief Librarians everywhere must spend more and more of their time doing – making the case for a larger and more central role for their library in the community and we do this in many different ways. For example, we now seek out media coverage instead of merely reacting to media enquiries. That coverage puts us in the mainstream of a city that loves, but occasionally forgets the crucial role its libraries play in its burgeoning creative life.

When the headlines in Canada's biggest newspaper read: "Renewed libraries

speak volumes," well, that speaks volumes about our success in getting our message across. If we don't make this connection, if we don't boast about our defining superlative, it simply won't happen. The reality is, no city council or civic bureaucracy is a benign, passive, or static beast. It is always changing, always questioning, always in motion. So we have to be as well.

I've found that building credibility helps us win more than our share of political battles. This, in turn, gives us the power to strengthen and improve our services. Just as important, it creates the opportunity for us to tell the world and get attention for what we are doing, which in turn builds our credibility for the next initiative.

It's kind of a virtuous circle. It's not revolutionary, but it works. But in the end, the transformation of the Toronto Public Library isn't just about Toronto. What my story is really about is us - about libraries and librarians here and elsewhere.

I said at the start that it's up to us to move public libraries into the mainstream of cultural life and economic promise. In 1998, I didn't quite believe that. Frankly, I never gave such a lofty ambition a thought. In 1998, I was at a lull in my career, stalled, even, and ambivalent in the absence of challenge. Then came my appointment as head of the new Toronto Public Library and coincidentally an offer to join the Bertlesman International Network of Public Librarians.

With it came the opportunity to travel and work with other library leaders from all over the world. It was on these journeys

that I saw extraordinary things being done with public library systems. I saw that while we had many best practices in Toronto, there were many elsewhere that were better. I saw what happened when a library and a city are truly aligned, when both need the other to reach their goals.

We all know the example of Singapore, how it transformed a library system that was basically in the 50s into one of the most modern and out-reaching systems in the world. It happened because the vision for library service in Singapore aligned itself with the major political goals of the country. Singapore's library understood before many others than if it were to play a role in the knowledge economy, its people had to be skilled up, and that the library must play a central role in its nation-building.

In the years since, I have seen entire library systems built from the ground up or instantly transformed. In Seattle, Rem Koolhaas has transformed what a library means by designing a space that looks like no other library on earth.

In fact, all through America, millions of dollars are being poured into public libraries to help restore their downtowns and urban cores. This is happening because cities like Chicago and Los Angeles have made the connection between a literate, civic society and economic prosperity. They have seen the link between information literacy and economic growth.

In Canada, Montreal's new central library, originally planned to accommodate just 5000 people per day, now receives up to 14,000 visitors a day, and is open 91 hours per week. Its

success has been a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the public library system in French-speaking Quebec, one which had been chronically under-funded.

In cities from Copenhagen to Minneapolis, from Lisbon to Denver, old libraries are being lovingly restored, while new ones are so stunning, they're becoming tourist attractions, echoing Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in a Spanish rail town that created the Bilbao Effect. Public libraries are now both objects of urban renewal and instruments of public policy. Cities have become their libraries' new believers.

They now believe what we hold dear. But one thing I do know. They won't *keep* believing unless we give them some help. The doors are open for libraries to play a defining role – and a sustaining one – in the growth of their communities. The potential for public libraries has never been greater than it is right now. But it's up to us to realize the opportunity in that potential. We have to allow ourselves to see – and seize – the possibilities in change, in upheaval, and in the unconventional.

In 1998, many librarians in Toronto viewed amalgamation as the end of a vibrant, effective public library system. But if I can end by quoting Mr. Churchill as I did at the beginning, it's clear that amalgamation was not the end.

It was not even the beginning of the end.

It was merely the end of the beginning.

Thank you.

