

# Trustee Tale

---

Trustee Tale is a joint project of the Manitowoc Calumet Library System, Nicolet Federated Library System, Outagamie Waupaca Library System, Winnefox Library System and Wisconsin Valley Library System.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions for future articles, contact your system director.



## Trustee Tale – Board Behavior & Expectations

Congratulations! You have been appointed to a public library board, now what? What does it all mean for you?

First, let's consider the reasons why public library boards are composed of various types of citizen appointees. Those reasons include:

- Isolates library operations from political pressure
- Ensures that the library collection is developed independently of any particular viewpoint
- Means the library is governed by the same people that it serves – the public.

Second, trustees must be able to uphold and defend the basic core tenets of libraries and librarianship. For example, trustees need to uphold the value of public libraries and a patron's right to free and private access to the library's materials, not question it. Board members are tasked to hold that public libraries are guarantors of many freedoms that Americans cherish and that public



libraries are, and should be, totally devoted to the public good. The library board makes policies that affirm these beliefs and are ultimately responsible for their library's ability to carry them out. Therefore, the library board should be composed of individuals who can execute this public trust successfully.

Third, serving as a public library trustee takes a serious commitment. This includes having the ability to attend and participate fully in board meetings; a willingness to become familiar with Wisconsin library laws and standards; an eagerness to understand the principles and practices of providing quality and equitable library service; and a strong commitment to freedom of information and inquiry for all people.

Additionally, this commitment includes the following legal duties of a trustee:

- Duty of Care – You are responsible to participate actively in making decisions on behalf of the organization and to exercise your best judgment.
- Duty of Loyalty – When acting on behalf of the organization, you must set aside personal and professional interests and put the organization first.
- Duty of Obedience – You are responsible for ensuring that the organization remains true to its mission, complying with its governing policies and all applicable federal and state laws.

Finally, according to Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), the general function of a public library trustee is to participate as a member of a team. Library boards run most effectively when members are mindful to conduct themselves as part of a team. As a team, the library board must work to protect and advance the interests of the community by effectively governing and developing their local public library.

Furthermore, it is key that library leaders serve with the best interest of the entire community in mind, not just their own personal interests or beliefs. Library leaders are required to be honest and forthright in all library matters. As members of a deliberative body, trustees are expected to present a united front and implement majority decisions. If trustees do not agree with a decision of the majority of the board, they must clearly and explicitly state they are expressing a personal opinion, and not that of the board.

While this may sound like an intimidating amount of work and information to learn, please know that your library director and fellow trustees will help you develop the skills and knowledge to become a valuable member of the team. Your willingness to put forth your best effort is the only prerequisite to embark upon your public library board trustee journey.

Information Sources include:

Biggs, M.; Kramer, G. We Have Been There, Too: Library Board Essentials for Effectiveness. Wilson Library Bulletin, v. 68. N. 9, p. 32-35, 1994. EBSCOhost.

BYLAWS of The Board of Trustees of the MANITOWOC PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Trustee Bylaws updated\_July 2023.pdf (manitowoclibrary.org)

Library Board Member Reference Document

Library Board Member Reference Document – Manitowoc-Calumet Library System  
(mclsweb.org)

Trustee Essential #1: The Trustee Job Description

Trustee Essentials: A Handbook for Wisconsin Public Library Trustees